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This Unkindness of Ravens

by [Violetscented](#)

Summary

Bookshop AU/crime drama with touches of urban fantasy. This AU is set in London where Regina Mills has inherited her father's old bookshop and the American Emma Swan starts off a new life as a private detective. Soon their paths cross and they have to work out why they irritate and fascinate each other so much while getting to the bottom of an odd crime.

Regina

It was amazing how it soothed her, the steady spluttering of the coffee filtering through to the pot. She allowed the sound of it to wash over her as she crouched down to straighten up a few volumes on the bottom shelf. Her Prada pencil skirt tightened around her legs as she crouched and reminded her that she should start wearing trousers to work now.

In the banking industry it had been all about power skirt-suits, expensive French stockings and crisp, white shirts. Regina knew that she had to look feminine enough to get the attention of the men in power and deadly enough to frighten the cologne off of them. But those days were over. Now all she had to contend with were a few bookish customers, who usually looked like they were dressed for lounging around the house, and the occasional suppliers who were usually more interested in having a chat about the weather than in what she was wearing.

She stood up, pulled down her skirt and tucked her T.M Lewin shirt into it with a practiced move until she knew she looked perfect again. The coffee maker had stopped its noise and the scent of strong coffee was filling the narrow aisles of the dusty old bookshop.

As she poured herself a mug she allowed herself a deep belly breath. Despite not having seen her mother for over ten years, she still lived on the shallow and subtle breaths her mother had taught her to take. Heaven forbid deep breathing would momentarily distend her stomach and ruin the shape of her meticulously trim figure. Her mother's voice still echoed in her mind.

"Hold your stomach in, Regina."

"Stand up straight, Regina."

"Always look like a winner, Regina."

"Work harder, Regina."

"Regina, you will never amount to anything unless you learn to always be better than those around you. *Work harder, be better.*"

No wonder she never relaxed and yes... no wonder that she had been known as a royal bitch ever since she was twelve. Had her upbringing made her successful? Yes, it had led to perfect grades, to Oxford and then finally, in small but gruelling steps, to a brilliant career at an influential international bank.

But now that was all gone. One severe mental breakdown and a yearlong recovery period later she found herself here. While her father's death had been what pushed her over into her long awaited meltdown, it had been the need to save his beloved old bookshop which had brought her back.

Thoughts of quitting, of letting the darkness engulf her and even plans of suicide had all been put to the side. Her father had been the only one who ever believed in her and now his shop needed her. She could do nothing else for him but save the badly maintained shop from being closed down.

Regina took her coffee into the tiny backroom which served as an office. She sat at his old desk, much tidier now that she occupied it, and opened a timeworn folder she had found at the back of a bookcase earlier this morning. It contained a few old invoices, a collection of handwritten notes about book titles that should be bought in and finally about a dozen old pictures. Some of them were of people she didn't know, young men at a picnic, two children fishing but then there was one that really caught her interest.

She sat back in the chair and looked at it with a sad smile. It was an old picture of Arrecife or perhaps it was Tias? She hadn't been back to her father's home island of Lanzarote since she was a teenager so she had a hard time distinguishing the town in the picture. But still... the square white houses all clumped together in a hodgepodge made her smile.

They looked like sugar lumps that had been spilled out onto the dark volcanic soil.

Henry Mills had rarely spoken about that beautiful place. She wondered if her father had missed his old home. Was London ever going to be home to a man used to the balmy heat and the dust blowing in from the Sahara? Still, he had seemed happy enough. He had loved this bookshop as if it had been another child of his and that was why she had to keep it open.

No matter what else she did with her life from now on, the bookshop had to be her main focus. When the bookshop was safe and thriving she could start working on not feeling so lonely anymore.

Emma

Chapter Notes

Author's note: Hello and thanks for reading! This fic won't be updated every day as some of my old fics have been, simply because I think the quality will be better if I have more time to think about the plot and maybe go over the text a little. I'm aiming to update this fic about twice a week but sometimes it will probably be more. If you want to keep an eye on when I might update, follow me on Tumblr where I am Violetscentedwriter , or Twitter where I am VioletscentedSQ or on Facebook where I'm Violet Scented.

The neon sign flickered in the darkness of the early November evening. Eugenia Lucas frowned at the sign. What was the point of getting an old-fashioned American diner sign made here in London if it was going to flicker as soon as it was put up? Sure, it made it look a little more authentic as those signs tended to flicker after a while, but it also made her new diner appear slightly rundown.

She had spent all her life savings on tickets to London and the extortionate rent of this place, not to talk about all the furnishings, and she needed the diner to be cosy and retro not cheap and scruffy if she wanted her gamble to pay off. And it really had to, this crazy scheme was all that she and her granddaughter Ruby had to cling to since Ruby's parents died in hunting accident.

A voice rang out behind Eugenia. "Granny? What are you doing out here?"

"The damn sign is flickering," she answered without turning around.

Ruby walked out of the diner where she had been mopping the floor, getting it all ready for the opening day tomorrow.

"Damn! Well we can get that fixed later I suppose. Have you seen Em?"

"Nope. Your little friend has been dodging me ever since I knocked on the door and she opened in just a tanktop and a pair of panties this morning. I think she's embarrassed or something or maybe she's worried that I am."

Ruby laughed. She had met Emma Swan back when they arrived at Heathrow and were waiting for their luggage. Everyone else walked off with their bags and Ruby and Emma were left standing there as the luggage carousel went round and round, displaying only a battered old Samsonite which neither of them owned.

After a long time the blonde next to Ruby had sighed. "Crap! I think they lost my bag again."

Ruby was happy to talk to someone who wasn't just in the same luggage situation but also a fellow American of about the same age as herself.

"Yeah, mine too. Well, mine and my grandmother's and if they don't produce her bag she's gonna have them for breakfast."

Emma had laughed and introduced herself and that was it, Ruby had made her first friend in London. They had spent the next hour being helped by a very polite Heathrow employee and finally getting Emma's weather-beaten, leather holdall and Ruby's and Eugenia's two huge let's-emigrate-somewhere-where-a-diner-will-be-exotic suitcases.

That was a couple of months ago and Emma had been living with them in a spare room ever since, paying perfunctory rent and functioning as both a guide to London and as a companion for the homesick Ruby. The two women had gotten to know each other well and Ruby was almost

thinking of the four year older blonde as a role model, albeit a slightly wayward role model.

Emma Swan was basically a nomad who had travelled all over the world, only stopping when what little money she had just earned ran out. She had just left the states to escape a bad relationship with a professional poker player called Killian Jones, and decided to head for an inspiring city where she had found it easy to get work in the past: London.

However, bar work and the occasional freelance writing for a magazine was boring Emma to tears this time and she was desperately looking for more meaningful and permanent work. That was why Ruby assumed that she would find Emma up in her room, frantically searching the web and various newspapers for an interesting job that she was qualified for.

Ruby went back inside and up to Emma's room. As she knocked on the door, Emma mumbled "yeah, what?"

Ruby grinned and let herself in. "Hey! Rude much?"

"Oh sorry, I was preoccupied. I think I figured it out!"

Ruby walked over to Emma's bed and sat down next to a bunch of old copies of Metro.

"Figured what out? Did you find a cool job?"

"Yeah. Well, no, but I'm just gonna make one for myself," Emma said with a satisfied grin.

Ruby knitted her neatly plucked eyebrows. "Make one?"

"Yeah. Remember that I told you that I worked as a bail bondsperson back in Boston and New York?"

"Oh yeah. Gonna do that here?"

Emma shook her head. "No, I don't think it works that way here. But you know what is kinda similar and you can just set up yourself? Being a private detective!"

Ruby's eyebrows shot up her forehead. "A private detective? Like in the 1940s?"

"No, they still have them now. I mean they are rare and not as romantic. You know, more jaded housewife saying 'find out if my husband is cheating' and less glamorous damsel in distress saying 'the international jewel thief kidnapped my rich uncle'.

Ruby laughed. "Shame. I think you'd rather like a smoking hot damsel in distress."

Ever since Ruby found out that Emma was gay she had made a point of teasing and play-flirting with her new friend. She was straight as an arrow herself but she had always had plenty of LGBT friends and loved flirting with them.

Emma sighed. "Yeah, especially if they were rich and paid me bucketloads of cash."

Ruby scrunched up her nose. "Not likely, Em. So, how are you going to set this up?"

"I think for now I'm just gonna advertise my services and see if there is any interest. If there is, I'll set up a proper little business. Might even get a cheap accountant and go all legit."

"Aww, our little vagabond is gonna grow up and set down roots?"

"Well, maybe for a while at least. I need to rest my boots and just stay put for a bit," Emma replied with a shrug.

Ruby got up to leave. "Sounds good! Well, the diner opens tomorrow. You can put an ad up in our window if you like? Granny won't mind.

Just... you know, make it look classy and not like a post-it note with a serial killer's handwriting."

Emma glared at her. "No shit, Sherlock."

Ruby laughed and retorted, "shouldn't I be saying that to you, Ms Private Detective?" Then she closed the door and left Emma to her plans for the future.

a coffee emergency

It was a Tuesday morning and Regina was exhausted. Spending all night waking from nightmares and trying to force her brain back to sleep had taken its toll. Still, she had made the commute over to the bookshop and was just about to make some coffee to basically inhale before opening the shop.

Mechanically, she measured out the coffee and the water and then hit the ON switch. The machine didn't light up. It took her a second to register that something was wrong but when she did there was a stream of decidedly unladylike swearing under her breath.

Regina always had a cup of coffee with her low fat yoghurt sprinkled with pumpkin seeds before leaving her flat, but it was merely a starter cup compared to the large mug she would always require while setting up the shop. There was no way she was going to fight her natural grumpiness and stay polite to customers without her second shot of caffeine, especially after a night like she had just had.

She weighed her options. There was a Starbucks and a Costa close to her nearest tube stop but that was still a 20 minute walk away and the queues were always huge, there was no way she'd make it back in time to open the shop. No, it would have to be that dreadful looking American diner that just opened up two shops down the road. As she grabbed her coat and left the shop she took a deep breath and hoped that the owners wouldn't be chatty. Those bloody Americans were always so blasted *friendly*.

Emma had decided to forgo her morning run and had stayed in to print out the ad she had been working on last night. It was all done and printed now and Emma thought it looked pretty professional actually. She was putting it up in the window next to the door as she saw

someone walk up the pavement. It was her; that drop dead gorgeous brunette that Emma usually saw walking from the tube when she was doing her morning run. Quite a few times she had been trying to catch the well-dressed woman's eye and shoot her the patented Emma-Swan-charmer smile, but nope, the brunette never even looked in her direction.

She was looking now though! Sadly not at Emma but at the notice she had just blutacked on the window. She read it, raised her eyebrows in an expression Emma couldn't interpret and strode into the diner and right past Emma.

Emma shrugged. *Fine, be stuck-up. It's not like you're the only hot chick in London*, she thought to herself as she smoothed the ad in place and sat down at the nearest booth to wait for her usual order of scrambled eggs and coffee.

Regina walked over to the counter and ordered a filter coffee. She had scanned the hot drinks menu and realised that she could choose between a hot chocolate, chamomile tea, white filter coffee, a black filter coffee or a mocha. Not very inventive nor of much use to a woman whose bloodstream was 50% espresso, but then it was supposed to be an old fashioned American diner so she supposed it did work with the theming. So did the grouchy old woman who served her.

"Good morning. I saw you looking at the ad over there. You in need of a private detective?"

Regina pursed her lips before deigning to reply. "Not really, I didn't think there were any of those left, actually. Surely people would turn to professional law enforcement these days?"

The old woman held out her hands in an I-don't-know gesture. "We'll see. Our lodger over there, she's the detective, is convinced that there will be a crowd of people needing her services. I don't know about that but I do think she'll be good at it. She's persistent like hell and seems to read people well. Anyway, what can I get you?"

"Oh, just a large black coffee to take away, please. I need to get back to open my shop."

The woman in the apron began to pour steaming hot coffee into a cheap-looking paper cup. "Your shop, huh? That mean we're neighbours?"

Regina spoke with some irritation as she was getting impatient. "I suppose so, yes. I own *Henry's books* a few shops down."

"I see. Well, I might drop in and get a romance novel one day."

"I'm afraid we don't stock those. Unless you count *Gone with the Wind* or *The Scarlet Pimpernel*," Regina said as she took the cup of coffee.

"Haven't read that last one. Might come in and buy it unless it's too pricy."

Regina was about to reply with a sarcastic comment, but when she looked up at the face of the woman opposite her, she saw something in those stern eyes. A challenge. A look that seemed to say *I know you are being condescending and I dare you to keep doing it*. Regina had to admit a momentary respect. She'd been called a ruthless bitch enough to be able to recognize and appreciate that trait in other people.

She merely nodded to the woman, put some money on the counter and said, "I'll put our only copy aside for you and give you a good deal on it. Consider it my way of saying welcome to the neighbourhood and welcome to London."

The owner of the diner seemed to recognize the show of respect and pushed Regina's money back towards her. "In that case, the coffee is on me."

Regina nodded again and began to walk out of the diner while she blew cooling breaths on her hot coffee. Just as she was about to awkwardly open the heavy door with her one free hand, she saw a flurry of blonde locks and realised that the aspiring private detective had jumped up and opened the door for her.

"Hang on. I'll get that for you. I think it's the least I can do after you so bravely made friends with Eugenia," the blonde said.

Regina quirked an eyebrow. "I am not sure we made friends, as such. But thank you for the courtesy, seems you are a gentlewoman as well as a private detective."

"I try. Especially with women as stunning as you," Emma said with a genuine-looking smile.

When Regina was momentarily speechless by the unexpected compliment, the other woman seemed to decide to switch the smile up to 100% and suddenly Regina found herself facing an adorable smile showing off a dimpled chin, high cheekbones and glittering green-blue eyes.

Like an automatic response, the corners of Regina's red-tinted lips quirked upwards and she quickly stopped them and told herself that it was just lack of caffeine that was making her behave foolishly.

"Right. Thank you. Goodbye," she said in clipped tones and walked out of the diner and back to the bookshop.

Yes, lack of caffeine. That and feeling lonely lately. Regina decided that those were the reasons that she couldn't stop thinking about that smile on the infuriatingly cheerful American's face.

Handle your issues

It was late on that Tuesday night and Emma had just gotten out of the shower. She was applying lotion to her skin, it always got dry while it was readjusting to the water quality of a new country. When she was done she looked into the full length mirror on the wall in front of her and realised how pale she was. She had gotten such a nice tan back in Savannah but that was all gone. No wonder considering it was months ago she was there. Or was it mere weeks? Emma wasn't sure and that actually frightened her. What kind of nomad was she turning into if she couldn't remember where she had been living lately?

She suddenly felt untethered and it was a new feeling for her. She had always liked to be free and not bound down by family or physical possessions. But standing there in a dingy room in the vast and still foreign London she felt something akin to fear prickling down her spine. What if this feeling lasted? What if her being disconnected to the world stopped being a good thing... what would she do then? Could she truly settle down? Was it too late to learn how to do that?

Her reflection was frowning and she could feel her heartbeat quicken unhealthily. It started feeling like that horrible sensation she had back in Singapore six years ago. That feeling of her heart beating too hard, her senses growing hazy, her stomach feeling ice-cold... that sudden realisation that something was physically wrong. That feeling that she would probably die. That feeling which she had later gotten diagnosed as a panic attack. She had to calm herself down.

She tried thinking about white beaches and palm trees and when that didn't work she thought about calm lakes outside of Buddhist temples but no... that didn't work either. As her heart decided to pound even harder she turned to what she so often did when nothing else worked. Women. Soft, warm women. Beautiful curves and lines making a poetry of their own. Soft skin responding to hers. Yielding wetness tasting of

spices, food, the sea and female secrets. She thought about the feeling of squeezing a soft breast and that was when she felt the pinch on her own breast. She had been clasping one of her own rosey-tipped mounds and squeezed a little too hard in her panic.

The weirdness of that made her give a little chuckle and suddenly she stopped seeing the colours that had been dancing before her eyes before. She must have distracted herself out of the burgeoning attack. She breathed a sigh of relief, that time in Singapore it had taken hours at the hospital until she was back to normal. Clearly this was just a small attack. But still... it felt like a warning sign and she couldn't ignore it.

She looked back at her reflection with grim determination. Something in her life had to change. Then she laughed quietly again as she saw that she was still gripping her breast for dear life. She released it and gently massaged it to sooth the tissue. It felt good. In fact it felt very good. Emma bit her lip as she thought about all the stories she had heard about orgasms releasing endorphins. Feeling happier and more relaxed sounded good right now and she was way too tired to exercise so yeah... a big climax would be good.

She let her hand start to massage the nipple instead and rolled it between her fingers until it was hard and sensitive. Then she did the same to the other one. She gave the two of them a tiny flick each, she liked a little rough play, even if she was on her own.

She thought about moving onto the bed but there was something novel about staying in front of the mirror. She had never masturbated in front of one before and she found now that it made the experience seem more out-of-body, like she was seeing someone else touch themselves. Observing what her hands were doing to her made her feel strangely embarrassed and turned on. It felt forbidden and a tiny bit like voyeurism even though it was only her in the room.

She watched her hand slide down her pale, toned stomach and then brush into the blonde curls below. Suddenly she was glad she hadn't shaved there lately, it felt like a small token towards modesty to have

hair there right now. Some of her secrets were kept from the all-seeing mirror.

She felt no wetness on her clit, too early for any burgeoning arousal to have spread through her folds. Her fingers moved through the warm softness, making the flesh more sensitive with every touch. Then she found her opening and felt the wetness coating it. She slipped a finger in and groaned under her breath.

She dared to look up into the mirror and watched herself as she let the finger slide out of her still tight opening and then work its way back in. She repeated the action over and over and both saw and felt her body respond. Her pussy was softening and opening to swallow her digit easier. The wetness was flowing heavily now and she took a moment to slide the finger out and spread the wetness through the hidden folds, giving her clit a loving rub as her finger touched it.

Looking into her own eyes she saw them became dark and hazy as her arousal grew. Her nipples had stayed hard in the cool room and she watched them for a while, pondering on how needy they looked. God, how she wanted to feel a woman's warm mouth on them right now!

She allowed a second digit to slide into her wet entrance and rubbed at the front wall of her pussy with eager fingers. She was panting hard now and pleasure had taken over her mind and body. She forced herself to look into the mirror even though it still felt strange and foreign. How was it that despite her many sexual escapades she had never done this? She had fucked with girls in front of a mirror, yes, but then she had always been looking at them. Now.... It was just her. Bared, exposed and quivering with the need to come. She thought she looked so vulnerable and... well... sort of sexy. Wanton. Dirty. It was almost intoxicating. She watched as she fucked herself and soon found that her discomfort was vanishing. She just wanted more now and she wanted to come.

She took her fingers out and began to play with her clit. It was swollen and clearly grateful for the attention. Emma bit her lip not to moan into

the empty room. Her breaths were coming out fast and hot now and there was little clouds of steam appearing on the mirror.

She was rubbing fast little circles on her clit and squeezing her breast hard with her free hand. Soon she felt her knees begin to buckle and immediately forgot all about the mirror. She stumbled over to the bed, still letting her two wet fingers circle her clit in ways that set off little fireworks of pleasure through her core.

She fell back onto the bed and began to rub faster and harder. She was so close. As usual, she fantasised as her orgasm neared. She fantasised that she had a beautiful woman bent over a table and she was fingering her from behind. Three fingers, knuckle deep in irresistible wet velvet. Just as Emma's orgasm crested and her clit pulsated pleasure through her entire body she saw her imaginary lover turn to look at her. It was that haughty brunette who was in the diner this morning.

Emma turned to bite the pillow next to her head. The last thing she wanted to do was wake Ruby or Eugenia with her muffled orgasm-groans. As soon as she had calmed down she gave a quiet chuckle. She was chuckling at that, when masturbating, she usually never came hard enough to not be able to be quiet AND that she had just come to the image of that rude chick who apparently ran a bookstore. She put her free hand over her eyes and thought that she should definitely get to know that woman's name now.

Henry's Books

Regina struggled her way into the bookshop with a brand new coffee maker under her arm and a cup of Starbucks espresso in her hand. When she was in, she glanced out the shop window at the early morning grey skies and wondered if it was going to rain later. They had said on the radio that it would and it certainly looked likely.

She placed the coffee maker on the counter and looked around. The sight of the machine in its shiny, colourful packaging made it even more obvious just how old everything else in the atmospheric little shop was. She didn't mind of course, she had grown up playing hide and seek behind musty old stacks of books and looking at gruesome stippled images in old fairy tales. The feeling that time had stopped, or even been turned back a century or so, in this shop was natural to her.

However, she was a businesswomen at heart and as she recalled her conversation with the owner of the new diner yesterday, she sighed deeply. She would have to make room for some new books. Bestsellers, thrillers, romances and perhaps even some travel books.

Ever since she took over the shop she had planned to open up an online shop to find a larger market for the rare and sometimes damaged titles that the shop held. After all, there was a finite number of her father's old customers still alive and within funds, and while the shop had been in her family long enough for them to own it outright and therefore not have to pay rent, she still had costs to consider. But she was now wondering if a web shop would be enough, maybe she had to let some modern stock into the cosy old shop.

As the rain started gradually smattering against the windows, she crossed her arms over her chest and evaluated how much of the floor space she could clear up without getting rid of valuable old stock. Not much. It would have to be a two-pronged approach then, open an online

shop to cater to book collectors and connoisseurs everywhere AND clear some room to get some James Patterson's and Jodi Picoult's. She tilted her head to the side and mused that some Haruki Murakami books would look great in that new window display.

As she looked at the window she saw movement outside. A person in a tight red t-shirt and black running trousers had stopped outside the shop and was looking up at the sky with its light rain. Regina looked closer at the foolish woman who had clearly gotten herself stuck in a burgeoning downpour and saw a ponytail of blonde hair and a beautiful face scrunched up against the fat rain drops. It was the private detective.

Regina sighed and against her better judgement went to the door. She opened it just enough to be heard out into the street.

"Excuse me! You should hurry to get inside. The rain has merely started and it will only get worse from here," Regina shouted over the smattering of the drops hitting the pavement.

The blonde looked at her with a big grin. "I know! Isn't it awesome? I've actually missed running in London rain. Oh, I'm Emma by the way, Emma Swan."

Regina looked at the blonde like she was an idiot. "I see. How wonderful for you. Well, don't let me get in the way of your soggy jog. Just make sure you don't slip on the wet pavement and crack your skull, it would clutter up the street."

Emma's grin turned cheeky as she shouted back. "Wow, rude much? Tell me your name and I promise that I won't clutter up your precious street!"

Regina rolled her eyes. "My name is Regina Mills. Now run along, some of us have to work."

Emma gave a theatrical bow. "Your wish is my command, your highness! Have a good day, Regina Mills. By the way, I love that dress."

With a final scoff Regina closed the door and listened to Emma's footfalls disappearing down the soaked street. She allowed herself a quick glance down at her dress. Yes, that raspberry red Gucci dress was gorgeous and it did fit her nicely she was happy to add.

Her brows knitted as she admonished herself for spending even a second thinking about the opinion of the kind of mad person who went jogging in the rain. She busied herself with putting the coffeemaker away, swigging down her espresso and then readying the shop for opening.

The morning moved slowly without any customers at all. She blamed the rain as much as the state of the shop for this and devoted her time moving some of the crumbling and less sellable books out into the small backroom for storage. When she was done she had two tall, slim bookshelves empty right at the front of the petite shop. That was where the more modern books would live.

She bit her plump lower lip as she pondered this new space. When she had sorted out the books she had found that copy of the Scarlet Pimpernel she had promised her new acquaintance and put it aside under the counter. Once again her meeting yesterday made her re-evaluate her natural standpoint, perhaps she should get a few romance novels in. She was certain that her father wouldn't have minded, the cultural snob in her house had always been her mother. No, Henry would probably have been sadder about the old books she had retired to the back. He never fretted about the new as long as there was room for the old too. Regina would run the shop by that code. There would be modernisation but she would never forget what Henry's Books was meant to be – a haven of old books and serenity.

It was almost lunch when the little bell over the door sounded for the first time. Regina looked up and saw Marco Galletti. He was an old friend of her father's who she had always called Gepetto because he was Italian, had a name beginning with G and amusingly enough was a carpenter who loved doing wood carvings in his spare time.

He folded up his umbrella and beamed at her. "Ah, little Regina – all grown up and taking over your father's shop. Hernando would be proud!"

Regina felt a chill of grief go through her. Hearing someone refer to her father by his birth name, Hernando Mirales, was even worse than hearing people speaking about Henry Mills. He had anglicized his name as soon as he moved to England to make it easier for people to pronounce it, not because he was annoyed with people getting the name wrong but simply because he wanted to make people comfortable and ensure they didn't have to struggle with the foreign tongue.

As a teenager, Regina had hated that he had given up his real name and always talked about changing her name to Mirales, reclaiming her heritage. But now she could admire her father's kind heart if not his strange logic or his yielding nature. There was too much of her mother in Regina for her to wish to give up something important to her merely to make others more comfortable.

She shook off her thoughts and how much she missed her father and replied. "I hope so. I'll try to honour his memory by making Henry's Books successful so that his work lives on."

"I'm glad to hear it," the Italian gentleman said. "Now, I believe your father had ordered a book about carving carousel animals all the way from America for me. He said it would be months until it arrived and well... I'm hoping it will be in by now?"

Regina looked annoyed with herself. "Oh yes of course, Signore Galletti. I have been meaning to contact all the people whose books have arrived weeks and weeks ago. I just haven't understood my father's filing system well enough to make out what book belongs to whom. Just a moment!"

She went to the back room where there was a shelf marked "reserved/ordered books" and picked out a grubby looking book about creating carousel animals out of wood.

"Here we are, Signore Galletti," Regina said as she walked back into the shop and handed him the book.

"Oh come now, please call me Marco. How much do I owe you?"

Regina gave a little smile. "Considering that you have made most of the bookshelves in here and how rarely you buy books, I am certain that daddy would come back to haunt me if I let you pay for that book. It is a gift... Marco."

He grinned gratefully from ear to ear and held out his hand. In a gesture remembered from her childhood, she placed her hand in his and let him place a quick kiss on her knuckles.

"I hope you have a good day, cara mia. Oh, and that you make your father's shop thrive. Even if you can't, always know how proud he would be to see you here. Call on me if you ever need my help."

"I will, Marco. Thank you."

He put on his cap and unfolded his umbrella before going out in the rain with his book clutched to his chest. Regina wanted to call him back and give him a carrier bag to protect the book from the rain, but it was too late.

She gave another melancholy smile and spoke into the empty shop, "I'm not making a good start at turning this shop profitable, daddy. But then, I know what you would say if I had let him pay. I'll charge the next customer a little extra to make up for it!" She chortled quietly and went to turn the *open* sign to *closed* so she could brave the rain to go get a quick salad for lunch.

Crime

Chapter Notes

Author's note: Thank you all for your comments, reviews and reblogs – they are all fanfic fuel and keep me writing and smiling. If you don't want to leave a review, feel free to chat with me on Tumblr where I am Violetscentedwriter , on Twitter where I am VioletscentedSQ or on Facebook where I'm Violet Scented.

Emma ran her fingers through her hair as she tried to think about how to calm the hysterical woman on the other side of the line.

"Okay, Ma'am. I understand, he's a West Highland terrier and he's called Rumpelstiltskin. I don't think I need to know why you named him that right now. You can tell me when I find him and bring him back to you. Right now I more need to know where you saw him last," Emma said in a calm and hopefully soothing voice.

The woman's speech was breaking with sobs. "O-on my p-pillow."

Finding lost dogs wasn't quite what Emma had imagined when she decided to be a private detective but hey... if it brought in some money and got her name out there – great. Besides, she really liked dogs.

"Alright. So he usually sleeps in your bed? He sounds like an affectionate little fluffball."

"E-exactly! Do you t-think he has been taken by t-those people you hear about on the telly?"

"Let's not assume the worst. Maybe he has just gone on an adventure and is being fed by an unsuspecting neighbour. Soon he'll miss you and come running back with his little tail between his legs."

The woman's sobbing voice came right back. "W-westie's have sticky-up t-tails. He c-can't have it between h-his legs!"

Emma felt for the poor woman who was clearly worried about a beloved pet, so she made an effort not to roll her eyes at that comment.

"Right. I'll make a note of that, Ma'am. So, when did Rumpelstiltskin go missing?"

The woman gave a loud sniff and exclaimed, "I t-told you! After I saw him on m-my pillow!"

Emma's squeezed her eyes shut and replied patiently. "Yes, Ma'am. But what day was that?"

"W-well this m-morning of c-course!"

Emma dropped the pen she had been using to make notes. "This morning? But it's 8 a clock now. When exactly did you last see him?"

"A-about 20 minutes a-ago."

Emma started to have a bad feeling about this case.

"Right. So... you think he might have run away or been stolen in the last 20 minutes? Has the front door been opened or have any strangers come into the house?"

When the woman replied there was less sobbing and more indignation. "N-no of course not! I-f that w-was the case I would have called 999!"

Emma closed her eyes again and regretting skipping her morning run and breakfast to take this call.

"I see. Might I ask why you think Rumpelstiltskin has gone missing then? Have you searched everywhere in the house?"

"I have searched all the places he could possibly be. He is nine years old and he has his favourite spots which he is ALWAYS in when he is not with me. I have checked my bed, his dog bed in the utility room and the armchair he favours in the lounge. He is simply not here, Miss Swan!"

Emma ran her hand over her face. She had a sneaking suspicion that Rumpelstiltskin wasn't more missing than she was, but still, you never knew. She wasn't going to make assumptions this early on in her career.

"Have you tried the trick with putting out a treat that he really likes? That always seems to work with my friend's dogs."

The woman sounded offended now. "I do not have to turn to such base tricks! Rumpelstiltskin loves me and this is the first time he has not come when I called him! Something is clearly wrong!"

"Could he perhaps have done something bad and not dared to face you or maybe not heard you?"

"No," Rumpelstiltskin's owner replied tersely.

"Okay. Um. Tell you what, if you try the food trick then we'll just clear my unlikely theory out of the way and then I will come over to examine the clues and then go looking for him," Emma said and hoped she hadn't pissed her first client off already.

The woman gave a theatrical sigh. "Fine. But it won't do any good! If he won't come when I call him then he is missing or dead!"

Emma heard the phone being put down on a surface and then noises which sounded like some form of packaging being opened. Suddenly there was the sound of a thud, as if something had been knocked over, and then some clacking which sounded like doggy paws against tiled floors.

The woman came back on the phone. "I put out some black pudding."

"Okay."

"Rumplestiltskin loves black pudding."

"Good. And?"

There was a long pause.

"He was in the laundry basket."

"I see."

"With a pack of half-eaten rich tea biscuits."

Emma bit her lip to not laugh. "Right. Those are very tasty."

"Clearly someone put him there. Lured him in with the biscuits."

Emma swallowed down all the comments that flew through her mind and just said, "yeah... maybe! You will have to keep an eye on this and contact someone if it happens again. Until then, all that matters is that he has been found. I'm glad to know he is alright."

There was another pause before the woman spoke. "How much will this cost me?"

"You know what, Ma'am? This one is on the house if you promise to recommend me to friends and family," Emma said as she shook her head.

"Fine. I will. Thank you again, Miss Swan."

The phone was abruptly hung up and Emma was left staring at her mobile with a mixture of amusement and frustration. Maybe she should have just gone back to tending bar?

It was another damp, grey morning and Regina pulled the collar of her coat tighter around her neck as she neared the shop. When she got to the door she took her keys out of her handbag and went to unlock it. The door wasn't locked. In fact, it wasn't even completely closed, it was ever so slightly ajar.

Regina felt her stomach lurch and her heart skip a beat. She knew that she had closed and locked this door yesterday. There was no way she could have just left it open by accident, she was far too controlled and methodical for that.

With baited breath, she peered in through the gap in the door to see if she could spot anyone inside. It all looked empty and dark. She waited another minute, counting the agonizingly slow seconds in her head, while she reached into her bag to get her cell and prepare to call 999 if she saw any movement in there.

There was nothing. No sounds, no movement and as she looked closer ... there wasn't even any damage to anything. Nothing that she could see from here anyway. She could see condensation on the inside of the shop windows and realised that the door must have been ajar for quite a while for that much cold to have seeped in through the small gap.

She dared to stick her head in and saw that the shop really was empty. The till was untouched and locked up safely as always. Everything seemed untouched and her mind started to play tricks on her, questioning if she had forgotten to close up the shop. But then, she was Regina Mills, not some preoccupied and forgetful normal mortal. She knew that she locked that door as meticulously as always.

She returned to the door and saw that the old lock had indeed been tampered with. Good, she wasn't going crazy at least. Someone had broken in. She turned and stared towards the backroom. Could they be hiding in there?

She looked around for some form of weapon. She picked up the nearest heavy book she could find, a huge version of the Bhagavad gita, before remembering the red gel self-defence spray that she kept in her bag.

Quietly she got it out of her handbag and crept up to the door to the backroom. The adrenaline and fear were controlling her to the degree that she didn't even stop to think that the safe thing to do would be to leave the shop and call the police and let them check the small room.

At least the door opened into the shop so that no one could be hiding behind the door and pounce on her. She grabbed the handle and yanked the creaking door open, brandishing her defence spray as if it was a gun. The room was empty. It contained nothing more than the usual book piles, a sink and a counter with a microwave and her new coffeemaker. She breathed heavily and suddenly felt a little queasy.

She noted that nothing seemed touched in here either. Not that she had thought that someone had broken in to steal her new coffeemaker, but still, the burglars had to want *something*. Unless they were just vandals, but as far as she could see... nothing was vandalised. In fact, nothing seemed to have even been moved.

Her queasiness was joined by an unease which gave her goose bumps. There was something strange going on here and if she was honest she would have preferred to just have been burgled. Then she could have called the insurance company and then an alarm company and dealt with everything with her usual pragmatism. But this... she couldn't explain this and therefore she couldn't fix it.

She frowned and did the only thing she could do. She called the police.

On the case

Regina frowned at the police officer who was scratching his head and looking around the shop with a strange look on his face. Regina tried to place that expression. Confusion? Anxiety? Constipation?

"Look, Madam. If you can't find anything stolen or damaged in here and I can't either, then the best we can do is file this under vandalism for ruining your lock. There didn't seem to be any fingerprints so the little brats clearly wore gloves," the constable said with a pitying smile.

"Little brats? You're assuming youths did this?"

"Well yes, Madam. We do have a problem with groups of bored teenage boys in this part of the city and well, who else would break open your lock and then just leave your till untouched?"

Regina shrugged. She didn't have a better answer but she still felt that if it was kids they would have spray painted something, ruined things or rifled through the copy of the Kamasutra on a display in the corner. But then, maybe teenage boys today didn't know what the Kamasutra was or just felt that if they knew what doggy style was they knew how to please a woman. Great, now she made herself angry. And the police officer wasn't helping. He kept smiling at her and asking if she was alright, of course she was bloody alright, just... pissed off!

"I'm sorry, Madam. There's not much more I can do right now. I've talked to your neighbours and they didn't see anything and so that leaves us with not much to go on," he said with a quick, professional pat on her hand.

When she subtly moved her hand away he continued. "Someone from the Yard will call you if we find uncover anything else or if there is a series of these break-ins. I've got a few sources on the streets and I will interview them but I have to be honest with you, Ms Mills - this doesn't

like the work of real criminals to me and if it is just a group of neighbourhood boys then we are unlikely to catch them. Just be grateful that they lost their nerve before they took anything or damaged any of your property."

Regina gave a curt nod. She realised that he was right but she still felt that more should be done here. She hated not knowing what had happened and she wanted clear cut answers.

"Thank you, constable Locksley. I appreciate that you will keep me informed of any developments."

He gave her another weak smile but this time his eyes twinkled as he looked at her. "Speaking as a private person and not a police constable, I have to say that I fully believe that you are safe. However, if you like I could drop past the shop and have a look on my way home. I live not too far away and I could easily make a habit of stopping off to ensure that you and the shop are okay before heading home."

Suddenly the penny dropped. This was a man of honour and chivalry and he saw her as a damsel in distress. *Well bugger that for a start.*

"That won't be necessary, constable Locksley. I'm certain your wife wants you home right away," she said tersely and nodded to his wedding ring.

"Oh... Marian understands that I am dedicated to helping our citizens. She wouldn't mind if I just swung by the shop to make sure it was all locked up and that you were safe."

The worst part was that she was sure he meant to do just that, protect her and not even make a move. Shame, if he had made an attempt at real flirting she could have reported him to his superiors or told his wife. Still, she was not going along with this chivalrous little game. Not in 2015. Not Regina Mills.

"Well your wife might not mind but I'm certain my girlfriend would. She hates it when men we don't know hang around for no good reason. Now

if you excuse me, I have business to tend to," Regina cut him off and ushered him out the door.

When he was gone she stood staring at the shop, arms crossed over her chest and brain calculating her next move.

Her mind strayed to how easy the lie about the girlfriend had come to her. Playing the gay card was often a good way to get rid of blokes, unless they were creeps who wanted to turn lesbians of course. Then a quick step of her high heels onto their foot worked better. She realised that while she had preferred to keep the fact that she was bisexual secret in the banking industry to avoid corporate gossip, she could now be completely open with it.

Perhaps she should start dating women again, her run in with Constable Robbie Locksley had certainly reminded her of how tired she was of the heterosexual mating games. The problem was that she hated gay clubs and the last time she tried online dating she ended up with a very attractive woman who sadly turned out to become insanely obsessed with her after the first date.

She gave a little huff of breathe at how her mind had just been distracted by the idea of dating. Something had to be done about the shop. She was sure as hell not going to just sit back and wait for last night's occurrence to happen again. She was going to get answer and a culprit to scare the pants off.

There was a tentative knock behind her and when Regina turned she saw a face peering in through the half-open door.

"Hi! Sorry, I just saw the police driving away and just wanted to make sure you were okay? I didn't mean to snoop or interrupt or anything though," Emma Swan said with a furrowed brow.

Regina stared at her for a second. Maybe it would be worth a shot?
"Miss Swan. Are you really in the business of being a detective?"

Emma opened the door and gingerly stepped in, still not sure if she was intruding. "Yeah. I am."

Regina squinted slightly at the blonde. "Do you have any qualifications?"

Emma stood up straight, seemed confident without being cocky and was looking her right in the eye. Regina felt that was a good sign.

"In a way, yes. I haven't gone to detective school or anything but I used to be a bail bonds person back in the states and I was in a relationship with a cop for two years. I picked up a lot during that time."

"Alright. Well if you don't charge an absurd fee, I'd like to hire you. You can't botch the job any worse than the police seem to be set to do anyway."

Emma put her hands on her hips and stood with her legs wide. Regina could hear her mother's voice in her ear nagging about standing in an unladylike manner but she ignored it.

"Okay," Emma said. "Tell me what's happened here and I'll see if I can help you."

Regina took a deep breath and began to explain everything that had happened since she found the door unlocked. When she had finished Emma hummed and then bit her lip pensively.

"So the cops think it's just kids, huh?"

"Apparently," Regina said in a cynical tone.

"Well, I mean it could be. The little thugs could be practising on breaking locks or one of them could have been dared to break in or something... but to be honest with you I doubt it."

Regina quirked an eyebrow. Perhaps asking the crazy jogger for help hadn't been a waste of her time after all. "Why is that?"

"This doesn't look like it was kids to me. I mean, the lock isn't ripped or completely wrecked. Whoever broke in here knew how to pick a lock and had the right equipment to do it silently and quickly. Also, they picked one of the few shops here that doesn't have an alarm system and one that is out of the way of the street's CCTV camera."

Regina looked surprised. "How did you know that my shop is in a CCTV blind spot?"

Emma shrugged as she looked around. "The cops would have had more to go on if they could just check the footage."

Regina nodded, grudgingly impressed.

"Anyway, that cop was right. There are a bunch of bored kids hanging around. But... I've been keeping an eye on them. They seem more into trying to score drugs than breaking in to get money. Considering their outfits, the fact that they can afford to live in a nice part of London and their attitudes; I think their parents have cash."

Regina gave her a wry smile. "Oh, is observing the local youths a police trick you picked up from your boyfriend?"

"Girlfriend. And no, I think it's just common sense for anyone who is curious like me."

Regina felt like she had just stepped into something wet and unpleasant. She closed her eyes and inwardly cursed fate for putting a lesbian right in front of her a mere minute after she had decided to start dating women again, just to make it this messy, cheerful, unsophisticated and butch thing whom was certainly not Regina's type. Why couldn't it have been someone like... Cate Blanchett? Was that too much to ask?

"I think you are right to be suspicious. I think something is going on here," Emma said. "I'll take the case if you are offering it. We can talk about the fee later. Right now I want to go talk to the neighbours. The police tend to ask questions in a kinda clinical way and they scare people. A concerned fellow neighbour is more likely to find what

people thing *they might have heard* or the gossip about who around here might have a criminal past."

"Yes, that sounds reasonable. Consider yourself hired. Well, I am going to open up the shop. The show must go on and all that," Regina replied and walked over to the counter.

Emma turned to leave and then stopped in the door. "Oh... by the way, I'm sure you were going to do this right after you had opened up or something but... you won't forget to call the locksmith to get a new lock and then call an alarm company to get an alarm system installed, right? It's really overdue that you get this place secured."

"Yes. Of course I was going to do that, Miss Swan. I'm not an imbecile."

"Right. Good! Okay, I'll be back when I've spoken to everyone who's at home," Emma said and left.

Regina felt fuming at being reminded of what she had to do like she was a wayward child. It only increased her annoyance that she couldn't help but notice what a perfect, pert arse her new detective had as she walked out of the shop.

Mary

It was late in the afternoon and slowly turning dark when Emma returned to Henry's Books. Her search hadn't been fruitful. None of the neighbours had seen anything or had any clear suspicions.

In fact, the only person that Mrs Gardner, who owned the ancient haberdashery opposite the bookshop, thought was suspicious was Regina. And that was just because she said that anyone who doesn't even bother to be polite and engage in small talk on the street was clearly hiding something. She neatly tied this into the fact that Regina dressed far too posh for someone running a bookshop in a medium-affluent part of the city.

When Emma kindly debunked Mrs Gardner's theories about this being revenge from some former highflying business competitor or a jealous wife of some 'fancy lawyer that Ms Posh-Skirts over there was carrying on with on the side', there really wasn't much more to be said and Emma took her leave to return to Regina with the bad news regarding her lack of leads.

She opened the door, rushed into the shop and opened her mouth to speak to the woman behind the counter... only to find that it wasn't Regina but another brunette. This one had a cute pixie haircut and an earnest smile.

"Hello there! Can I help you?"

Emma felt confused. Regina hadn't mention having any staff. "Uh, I was looking for Regina?"

"She's out back talking to a supplier on the phone. Apparently she cleared the shelf over there for new books before she had even ordered any, so now it's just going to gape empty until she can get a good selection of popular new fiction ordered and delivered. I love it

because it is one of those rare times when I spotted something that she missed!"

Emma smiled at the enthusiastic woman. "Yeah, it's hard to imagine Regina Mills making mistakes."

"Yes. It's rare. However, sometimes she sees the big picture and misses details. Luckily, details is sort of my area, it's part of being a mum I think. You have to remember a million things and notice all the little details. Like when Henry's school uniform has a stain on the elbow or when his favourite juice has upped the sugar contents. Mums need to have an eye for detail!"

"Oh, I'm sure they do," Emma said with a bemused smile. This woman really didn't seem like a professional bookseller. "Did you say Henry? Like in Henry's Books?"

The brunette nodded. "Yes, Henry. I and David, that's my husband, named our son Henry after Regina's father. I grew up in the house next to Regina and as my father was a single parent and working a lot I was often in the Mills' house. Usually following Regina around and asking if she wanted to play or if I could borrow her things. When she got tired of me and kicked me out of her room, I used to sit and read with Henry. He was very dear to me so I wanted to name my little boy after him."

Emma grinned at the mental image of an irritated child-Regina skulking around a big house with this enthusiastic woman on her heels. "So you were kinda like a little sister to Regina, then?"

"Yes! Still am, actually. We are just like family after all these years."

From the back room came an irate voice. "No, we are most certainly not. Stop telling everyone that we are like family, Mary!"

The woman behind the counter just kept beaming at Emma and said, "see, just like an annoyed older sister! She's Henry's godmother too and she dotes on him. Spoils him rotten and buys him stuff that I and David could never afford. So, helping out here at the bookshop while Regina

needs a break to do something in the back, is the least I can do for her. Especially when Henry is in Ireland with his dad and visiting his ailing mother. It gets lonely in our big house!"

"Which is why she is currently popping into my apartment at all sorts of hours and trying to force me to watch some hideous old tv show with her," Regina explained to Emma as she walked out of the backroom with her phone in her hand.

"Regina Mills! Say what you want about me but do not badmouth my Gilmore Girls box set!"

Regina gave a long sigh. "Fine, fine. Forget I said anything, dear. Now that you have spilled your life story to Miss Swan here, allow me to fill in the blanks. Emma Swan, may I introduce the woman who is, somewhat regrettably, my best friend; Mary Margaret Nolan. Mary, this is the detective I employed to look into the matter of the break in."

Mary's eyes grew big. "You're the private dick?"

Regina winced. "For heaven's sake, do not call her that."

Her friend held up her hands in a peacekeeping manner. "Alright, just trying it out."

Emma laughed before replying. "Yeah, I suppose I am. Sadly I'm a private dick without any leads so far." She turned to look at Regina. "I'm afraid none of your neighbours have seen or heard anything. None of them could point me towards any shady characters either."

Regina gave a wry smile. "No one even mentioned the three strange Americans holding up in a shabby café hoping to pass for a retro US diner?"

Emma made a grimace. "Very funny, lady! Anyway, I'm gonna go back to that surprisingly excellent diner and have a think about my next move. There are some avenues to go down, I've just gotta pick where to start. I

suppose you haven't spotted anything that has been taken or tampered with in the shop since I was last here?"

"No, Miss Swan, I would obviously have informed you right away if I had," Regina said and crossed her arms over her chest.

That was an unfortunate move from Emma's point of view as it brought attention to Regina's chest, which was one of the places where Emma was trying to keep her wandering gaze from straying to. Hard as she was trying not to objectify her client, she did find herself appreciating practically everything about the haughty woman, from her way of moving so gracefully to her way of using her eyebrows to display her moods. Regina might be rude and stuck-up, but damn, she was the most beautiful woman Emma had ever seen – and she had seen quite a few in her well-travelled life.

Avoiding any improper places to stare, Emma ended up looking into brown eyes the hue of milk chocolate. Those eyes were as stunning as the rest of Regina and they were gazing right into her own sea-green eyes. The eye contact was mesmerising.

Suddenly their gaze was interrupted by the clearing of a throat. "If you two are going to stand there staring at each other, I might just pop home to make some tea. You could call me if any customers actually show up today, Regina."

The loaded moment broke and Regina turned to glare over at her friend. Emma suddenly felt a little lightheaded and very ashamed of it. Pretty girls shouldn't be able to make her woozy, she wasn't a teenager anymore.

"I, uh, should be heading back home to my room to plan my next move, then. I'll come by tomorrow morning, Regina. It was nice meeting you... Mrs Nolan was it?"

"Call me Mary! My real name is Mary Margaret after my dad's favourite catholic school teacher but obviously that is... well... a little hideous. So call me Mary, everyone else does. Well except David who calls me

Snow... but that is a long and soporifically romantic story that I won't bother you with now," she said with another heartfelt smile.

Regina rolled her eyes and interjected. "Sorry, Miss Swan, she's a lovely person but brevity isn't her strong suit. I shall see you tomorrow when you will hopefully have some productive ideas to share."

Emma ignored the hint of criticism and just waved her farewell as she opened the door and let herself out. She suddenly felt in need of a stiff drink. This woman was exhausting!

The door closed behind Emma and for a moment there was silence in the shop.

Mary Margaret Nolan smirked as she watched the blonde walk down the street towards the diner. "Oh my."

Regina gave a grunt. "Don't start, Mary."

"Fine."

Silence fell again for a few seconds.

"You are going to make a move, though.... Right?"

"Mary! I told you not to start all that. I am in no way attracted to that blonde mess of a woman."

Her friend gave a little cackle. "Sure, and I am a little teapot."

Regina's tone turned dark. "Mary!"

"What?! You were basically shagging her with your eyes!"

"I was not! Anyway, we have nothing in common," Regina snapped and went to put her phone back in her handbag.

"How would you know? All you do is bark orders at her! Anyway, you don't need to have a lot in common for you to... you know... scoff some American pie."

Regina looked at Mary with shocked disgust evident on her face. It was rare that the well-behaved stay at home mum was lewd but whenever she was it always gave Regina a bad case of indigestion.

"Oh what? There is nothing wrong with making sure that your business doesn't heal over while you wait for Mr or Mrs Right."

Regina pursed her lips and glared daggers at Mary. "Firstly, nothing is 'healing over'. Secondly, please refrain from ever speculating about the state of my 'business' or what I may or may not be 'scoffing'. It's bad enough that you try to make me fall in love with every single person that comes my way, please don't try and get me laid as well."

Mary held her hands up. "Alright, whatever you want, love. I just want to see more of those rare Regina-Mills-smiles. I miss them."

Regina sighed and put her hand over her friends' on the counter. "Fine, we will give that soppy TV show of yours a go tonight and we'll see if that can make me smile."

Mary Margaret furrowed her brow. "And if it can't?"

"Then perhaps I'll look around for suitable people to date soon. But Emma Swan will not be one of them," Regina said with absolute finality.

"Why is that?"

"She's... too cheerful," Regina explained with a disgusted grimace

"I'm cheerful!"

"Exactly! And most of the time I want to put you under a sleeping curse to quiet you down."

Mary rolled her eyes. "That can't be the only thing wrong with her."

"Well no... she's unsophisticated."

"Good, then you get to be the sophisticated one in the relationship and you can lord it over her, you like that. What else?"

Regina thought for a second. "She's... American."

"Good! Americans are refreshing because they are so different. It'll shake you up a bit! What other silly excuses do you have to cross her off the list?"

Regina gave her friend a look so burning with contempt that anyone else would have backed away. Mary Margaret Nolan on the other hand just walked around the counter and looped her arm around Regina's thin waist to walk the grouchy woman towards the backroom and its blessed coffeemaker.

As she was semi-dragged towards the salvation of caffeine, Regina replied, "she's... she's too butch."

"Ha! With that amount of makeup, subtlety applied as it may well be, and those meticulously hand-curled locks she is hardly butch. Anyway, you were always complaining that Katherine out-feminised you, perhaps for your next girlfriend you need someone less girly?"

Regina nearly shivered at the mention of her ex-girlfriend's name. Why did she have to be so weak for blondes? It never ended well. But then... Emma Swan seemed to be the polar opposite of Katherine Midas, heiress and fulltime adulterous bitch. Perhaps it would be nice to be with someone who had her feet on the ground and simpler tastes? But then, what would she and the brash American ever talk about? No. Regina needed to date someone more like herself: reserved, refined and horrible. Regina felt her breath hitch. *Wait, did I just refer to myself as horrible? That's depressing.*

Mary took in the pained expression on Regina's face. "Okay, let's get some coffee into you and then you can man the counter while I go home to your place and see if I can set up a nice dating profile for you online."

Regina's voice came out deep and gravely as she replied. "I swear, Mary Margaret, one day I'm going to poison you."

"I know," the younger woman said and rested her head on Regina's shoulder.

Automatically Regina turned her head to place a light kiss onto Mary's pixie cut hair.

We are always watching

Chapter Notes

Author's note: Between having three fics out there (this one, Sheath her sword and Whitewater Place) and traveling a lot I find that I am struggling to keep up with reviews. If I miss your review or perhaps even reply to it twice I sincerely apologize! Just know that I do read and appreciate them all. Reviews are as always fanfic fuel.

The street which housed Henry's Books and Granny's Diner was nearly empty. It had just stopped raining and the streetlights made the wet road glitter eerily. One of the men looked around but saw nothing stirring but a single, mangy fox rooting through some rubbish in an abandoned doorway.

"Get on with it," the other man hissed. "This is bloody London, someone *will* be awake so the less time we spend actually breaking in – the better."

The shorter man nodded curtly and got his lock picking case out of his coat pocket. As he worked on the new lock, which had been installed mere hours ago, he prayed silently that they would find what they needed this time. He had to assume that soon the posh bitch who owned this place would get an alarm system installed and that would make their life so much harder. Not to mention that They would probably have them terminated if they didn't get what they wanted.

This lock and his frayed nerves made him need to make use of all his lock picking skills, luckily he had plenty of those. He prided himself on

being one of the best in the business and he knew that this was why he had been hired. His employers didn't just use any common street thugs, they hired only the very best. They were far too powerful and squeaky clean to sink to the level of ordinary criminals. There was so much at stake here.

He kept working in silence, ignoring the sweat forming on his brow. The clicking of the lock sounded unusually loud in the silent night but after a while the mechanisms yielded and the door could be opened.

"Took you long enough," the taller man whispered.

"Well this lock was better and new, wasn't it? Stop complaining and just get in there."

They walked in silently in and started looking. They had gone over the little bookshop last night but it hadn't been very thorough as they had been interrupted by a group of lost and very intoxicated pub goers wandering back and forth outside the shop trying to figure out how they could cut to Whyteham street, or maybe it was Whitman street? This time they had to check everywhere. It was just a matter of finding a set of old books in a bookshop filled with old books, in the dark, in a bit of a hurry. Easy as pie.

He lit his tiny little flashlight and masked as much of the beam as he could with his fingers. "I wish we didn't have to be so cautious. Why won't they just let us toss the place? It'd be quicker."

"They don't want us hurting the books."

He knew what his companion meant. They could ruin this whole place but if they as much as scratched what they were searching for, their lives would be forfeit.

Time creaked on. With gloved and gentle hands the two men lifted books for a closer look and checked behind shelves for any hiding places.

"Do you know how big they are meant to be?"

"Quite big. You've been told what they bloody well look like. Now for god's sake, shush and keep looking," the taller man replied with a hint of panic in his voice.

"I'll go check the back room."

He opened the door and winced as it creaked. He stood frozen and peered out the shop windows. No one was there. He hurried into the small back room, as there were no windows here he could let the beam of his mini flashlight roam free. Everything was neat and tidy here. The only thing on display was a white mug with what looked like dark red lipstick on it. Suddenly he felt a need for a cup of tea.

He started looking at the shelf marked 'reserved/ordered books' but just like yesterday, it was a dead end. He just then remembered that his companion had been given a note which would be left here, requesting the books, if they should fail to find them. That was all well and good for the mission, but of no solace to him. Considering that They struck him as the sort of organisation which didn't like to leave loose ends, he feared they would simply make him disappear unless he made them very happy indeed. But only returning with the books perfectly intact tonight would achieve that. He felt cold dread bloom in his stomach and spread its tendrils through his body. He needed to find those damn books.

Once more he searched the neat piles of books that had clearly adorned the now empty shelf in the shop. Nothing. In desperation he looked under the sink and found only a rubbish bin and some old Tesco bags. Same as yesterday. He walked back out, shielding the light from his flashlight.

"I think we covered it all yesterday," he whispered.

"Bugger! I'm afraid you're right. I've checked all the shelves again. They're not here. We'll have to leave the note. Hopefully They will be satisfied with that and not take their frustrations out on us."

The next morning Regina arrived and with the force of paranoia checked the lock. Her heart skipped a beat when she realised that it was in fact broken again and that the door once more stood ajar.

Should she go in? The constable had told her that doing so had put her in danger. With an annoyed sigh, she moved away from the door and went straight to calling the police. As soon as they promised they would send someone out, Regina hung up and called Emma.

A sleepy voice mumbled, "hello?"

"Sorry to wake you, Miss Swan. There seems to have been another break in."

"Shit! Right. Um. I'll just get dressed and I'll be right there," Emma said and hung up.

Regina stood and waited for either the police or Emma to arrive and was surprised to find that Emma got there first. The blonde came crashing out of the door to the diner with her hair in a mess and crumpled clothes barely thrown on. In fact, as the blonde rushed over, Regina saw that she was buttoning up her tight jeans. She squeezed her eyes shut to keep from looking at the small expanse of pale skin visible above the waist line as the blonde finished off the top button.

"Hey. Sorry, must've overslept. You okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Well, except for that I haven't had my second cup of coffee yet of course. I just arrived and found the door like this. On the recommendation of the police I haven't gone in. They should be arriving soon."

Emma chewed the inside of her cheek and nodded. Regina could see by the way the blonde stared into the shop window that she wanted to go in and investigate. Regina knew the feeling.

Police sirens could be heard in the distance and Regina smoothed down her coat. She cast a look at Emma and felt a sudden need to smooth down those wild blonde stray tresses going everywhere and to tell the woman to go put on a jacket. She held her tongue and focused on Constable Locksley who just stepped out of the car. This time he had a female colleague with him. They were both armed and looked right past Regina and Emma towards the shop.

"Miss Mills. Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine Constable Locksley. I just got here to see the door opened again. We haven't heard any sounds or seen movement from within the shop."

Regina noticed that at the word 'we' Constable Locksley stared at the blonde woman dressed in only a crumpled blue linen shirt, a pair of jeans and trainers without socks.

"This is Emma Swan. She lives in a room above the American diner over there. I called her when I saw what had happened."

Regina didn't explain *why* she had called Emma simply because she didn't know if the police would disapprove of her hiring a private detective, or even worse... laugh at her. Her lack of explanation led Constable Locksley to look at the barely dressed woman with suspicion.

Emma smiled politely at the two constables but then looked back into the shop, squinting slightly to survey as much of it as she could. Then she put her hand on Regina's arm and looked at her with concern. "You sure you didn't seen any movement in there when you arrived?"

The touch was completely innocuous, especially from someone not British. But as Regina looked at Constable Locksley she could see what he saw. A strange woman, so undressed that the cold November winds

were embarrassingly enough making her nipples hard through her linen shirt, who had no reason to be Regina's first call in an emergency. Standing right here, touching Regina and looking very worried for her. Suddenly Regina remembered lying to Constable Locksley about having a girlfriend. Yes, she could see what this looked like. Should she correct the mistake? No, she decided that this was a good cover to keep the chivalrous constable from becoming too protective again.

Regina just smiled as he replied. "Yes, dear. It seemed completely empty. Don't worry, I was careful and kept safe."

Emma cast her a slightly surprised look at the friendly tone but then looked back into the shop. The female police officer was making her way in and Constable Locksley hurried after her. They checked the premises while Emma and Regina waited outside. Emma was shivering violently now.

"Go fetch a coat. You won't miss anything," Regina ordered.

"Nah, I'll be warm enough as soon as we get inside. My jacket is all the way up in my room and I don't want to miss what the cops might find."

Regina took in the shivering, stubborn woman and the embarrassing appearance of the blonde's nipples, an occurrence which didn't seem to worry Emma much. It bothered Regina though and she quickly thought about what she had put on this morning; suit trousers, shirt, a blazer and then the coat on top of that. She could shed a layer without looking silly or freezing to death.

She removed her coat and handed it over to Emma without looking at the blonde. "Take the coat and wear it or I'll rescind my offer for you to take my case."

Emma scoffed but took the coat and put it on. "Nice. Bet it cost a fortune."

"Not a fortune as such, it's only Ted Baker."

"Oh. Right. *Only Ted Baker*, huh? I bet it cost more than my plane ticket over here."

Regina was about to snap back a comment when the door opened and the two police constables stepped out.

"Nothing seems to have been ruined or tampered with this time either. There is a note though. I'm afraid we have to take it back to the station as evidence but do please read it and tell us if it make any sense to you," Constable Locksley said as he held up a plastic bag containing a small slip of white paper.

Regina read it through the evidence bag. It had clearly been written on a computer and Regina's nerdy brain recognized the font as Book Antiqua. It read:

Place the series of books called This Unkindness of Ravens in a box or piece of luggage outside the door of your shop tonight. As soon as we have the books we will leave you and your bookshop in peace. We will not come to claim the books if the shop is being observed or recorded in any way. We are always watching.

Regina felt confusion crowd her thoughts. Emma read slightly slower and had just finished the note while the female Constable introduced herself as Constable Leticia Jones and asked if Regina recalled that particular series of books.

"Well yes... they are a collection of five or six books that my father bought at an old auction many years ago. I know them well simply because they are a bit of a curiosity. No other copies were printed and still no collectors or book hoarders have ever wanted to buy them."

Emma knitted her brows and got involved. "Why?"

Regina turned to her. "Because the books make no sense. They are mainly gibberish and long tirades about a flock, or an unkindness if we are being exact, of ravens that nested in the trees in the author's garden. The author was a printer and spent some of his free time writing these

insane books and then printing them. That is as much as my father could ever figure out about the books and the man who created them."

Constable Locksley looked extremely confused. "But why would anyone want them? Could they be valuable?"

Regina pursed her lips in thought before replying. "As a curiosity perhaps, but I doubt it. They don't even have a unique binding, they're just really odd books that no one has ever shown any interest in but my father. And that was just because he loved quirky little things like that."

"Do you have these books in your possession," Constable Locksley asked.

"Well, yes. But they are not in the shop anymore. They were on the bookshelf that I emptied to make room for new books. I was going to throw them away but then I remembered how much my late father had been amused by them and so I took them home to decide whether or not to keep them for sentimental value."

Constable Jones shared a glance with her colleague and then turned back to Regina. "We will require you to bring them down to the Yard as soon as you can. We will return there now with this note and fill out all the necessary reports. I suggest you close the shop for the day and go home to fetch those books for us."

Regina nodded and crossed her arms over her chest to keep the chill out. "Yes, Constable. I have a friend who can wait here at the shop until the locksmith can come and then she can lock up and put a note up explaining why we are closed."

Emma started to take off Regina's coat. "Let me just go put some more clothes on and get my oyster card and then I'll come with you to your flat. Give Mary a call while you wait as I guess she is the one who'll be waiting for the locksmith?"

"Yes," Regina confirmed and smiled inwardly at how Emma would seem to know her quite well to an outsider. Yes, Constable Locksley

was probably still misunderstanding their relationship. Good.

Emma handed Regina her coat back and then jogged over to the door of the diner. The two police constables took their leave and asked Regina to be careful and to report anything out of the ordinary. When they had left, Regina went into the shop to call Mary and ask her to come over. She made a point of not telling her younger friend that she was about to head to her home with Emma Swan in tow.

it did matter

Chapter Notes

Author's note: I'm sorry. I'll fix it.

The walk to the tube had gone by fast as they had talked about the strangeness of the two burglaries being about a set of seemingly worthless books and repeating that none of this made sense. But now they were tapping into the gates and going down the escalators to the tube and suddenly they were both quiet and wondering what the hell to say.

It annoyed them both that they felt so uncomfortable but couldn't pinpoint why. Neither of them was a shrinking violet or unable to perform the duties of small talk but now they seemed tongue-tied. It was disconcerting and confusing. It wasn't just the physical attraction they felt for each other but perhaps it was that in combination with how they couldn't quite understand each other's personalities. Or perhaps because they were strangers who still felt eerily drawn to each other, as if they should know one another. One way or another, there was thick tension in the air and it made them both jittery and seemingly mute.

Emma tried not to show her unease, she made sure her body language displayed nothing but a professional, strong woman who knew what she was doing as they got on the tube and choose two seats for them in the middle of the empty row. Carefully, she kept her eyes on safe things like their surroundings, all to keep them away from that sexy scar adorning beautiful, full lips or those gorgeous hands that were busy opening a Metro and rapidly flipping through the pages.

"You read pretty fast, huh?" The question slipped out before Emma's brain could identify that it wasn't exactly sparkling conversation.

Regina didn't look up from her newspaper. "I suppose I do. Especially when the writing is atrocious and doesn't deserve more than a quick glance."

"Yeah," Emma agreed even though she didn't see what was so bad about the Metro journalists writing.

She kept her mouth shut after that and looked up at the tube map above the opposite seats. To keep her from going stir crazy she focused on the strange names of stations. What the hell kinda name for a station was White City anyway? And Mile End? Were they going for poetry when they named these places? This kept her pretty much occupied until Regina folded her newspaper neatly and placed it on the seat next to her.

"We are getting off at the next stop, Miss Swan."

Emma nodded and pretended that the deep, softly husky voice telling her that they were *getting off* hadn't given her a slight case of goosebumps.

The walk to the apartment was short and seemed to be mainly made up of steep stairs. Luckily both women kept themselves fit enough to be able to do it at a good pace and soon Regina was unlocking the door to an apartment in a nice and relatively new building.

Emma looked around and realised that Regina couldn't be affording her pricy clothes and the rent for this place on what the almost-always-empty bookshop was bringing in. Where was the money coming from? She had to get to know more about this woman, but preferably without asking, as Regina didn't seem like the sharing type. She'd google Regina Mills tonight and then maybe ask Mary a few subtle questions if they met again.

Stepping into the chic and sleek apartment with perfect interior design, Emma saw austere furniture and only a few strong colours in an otherwise monochrome style. But still, those few items in burgundy,

jade green and warm browns lent the place a hint of cosiness. Emma marvelled at Regina's good taste. From the beautiful paintings on the walls to the dark wooden floors, it all felt like the dream place to live for Emma. How did anyone create a home as thought through like this? She couldn't even create a home to begin with.

"I would offer you some coffee or tea but I really think we should get the books to the station as soon as we can," Regina said as she put her keys back into her handbag.

Emma cleared her throat. "Yeah, of course. Let's get the books and go."

Regina walked into the petite bedroom and opened a drawer in her closet. Ignoring the stiffness in her shoulders created by the strange tension between her and her guest, she picked up a tote bag from it and returned to the small living room which also seemed to serve as an office. Stacked nicely on a shelf next to her little desk where a set of books. Emma looked over and counted five thick volumes. They were hardcover and midnight blue.

Emma walked over to where Regina stood. "Can I see one?"

"Of course. This is volume one. See if you can make any sense of its contents," the bookseller said and handed Emma the heavy tome.

The spine read *This unkindness of ravens*. Emma opened it and read about a third of the first page. The text was small and slightly slanting. It didn't make it very easy to read, but then when Emma did make out the printed words – well, they still didn't become very clear.

The ravens have come.

My garden fills with black winged creatures with ink dripping from their feathers.

Harsh slaps from the soft feathers of a wing brushing against my cheeks.

This particular unkindness of ravens have claimed my property for their own.

They are everywhere. They gnaw and they devour. They take no hostages, they kill on sight.

I see them taking tree after tree for their own and I scream out my rage and helplessness.

I keen and I wail. I thrash them with brooms and whips and all they do is stare silently at me.

My fight is of no consequence to them. They have come for me and my soul and they wait patiently for the fight to leave my blood.

Their cold whispers echo over the grounds and chill my bones.

There is no escape. There is no hope. The knowledge of this beats in the hollow of my chest as a second heartbeat. I will do what I can to thwart them but I fear it is pointless.

This unkindness of ravens will consume me as they did her.

Emma looked up at Regina with a look of confusion and slight worry. "Okay, so is this really creepy, deep poetry or was this guy just plain crazy?"

Regina pursed her lips pensively. "My father always believed that the unkindness of ravens haunting the author were an allegory."

Emma frowned. "Excuse my ignorance but what's that?"

"Oh, it's a literary term. It's like a substitute or metaphor for what you are actually talking about. If that was the case, the unkindness of ravens in his garden would actually symbolize something else in real life."

Emma took the chance to clear something else up. "Right. And 'an unkindness' is what you call a flock of ravens, right?"

"Yes, exactly. It's the collective noun for a group of ravens. Anyhow, as you read further you soon realize that nothing in the books makes any more sense than what you have just read. We never get to know what the ravens would symbolise if they in fact were an allegory. There are five volumes with lines just like these. All about these menacing ravens and how they haunt him. Many of the lines reoccur, sometimes even on the same page. I have always believed that the author wasn't quite sane when he wrote and published them."

Emma handed her the book back and then put her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. "Yeah, sounds like it. Poor guy, he seems to have had a rough time."

"Yes, I would say so. Anyway, I'll bring them to the station and we will see what the police make of them," Regina said and opened the tote bag wide to make room for the books.

While waiting, Emma walked around the tidy apartment with her usual confident strides. Regina watched her from the corner of her eye. How did she always look so comfortable in whatever setting she was in? It was as if she shaped the world to her personality, making her never seem out of place. Regina felt a sting of jealousy, she very rarely felt comfortable. She was so often on edge, fighting to be perfect, striving to make sense of everything. Emma Swan just seemed to... be.

Regina focused on putting the books into the tote bag which had a large Tate Modern print on it. When she had gently placed the three first volumes into the bag she felt her gaze steal back to Emma. The blonde was standing by a shelf and letting her eyes roam over the five family pictures placed on the floating shelf on the wall. When her gaze settled on a picture of Regina as a teenager, curly-haired and standing next to her father with her arm tight around his waist, Emma's entire face lit up and she chuckled.

Regina suddenly felt oddly uneasy, it felt like Emma had just seen a soft vulnerable part of her that she was not ready to show the stranger. She cursed herself for having the pictures on display and for allowing Emma

to come with her up here. She placed the remaining two volumes into the tote bag with sudden hurry.

"Are you quite finished gawping at my private pictures, Miss Swan?"

Emma whirled around with a confused look. "Excuse me?"

"Yes, I suppose I will have to excuse you as you are working for me, but do not for a moment believe that means you can come into my home and take liberties like this," Regina said with a cold scowl.

Emma looked sucker-punched. "Whoa there. It's not like I went through your panty drawer. I just looked at some cute photos, that's all."

"Yes, well... we need to discuss boundaries and your inappropriate behaviour if you are to continue working for me. I realise that you were clearly raised by wolves but you still need to behave appropriately when you are a guest in your employers home," Regina bit back sharply.

She knew her rage was absurd but she didn't know how to change course now. The words flowed by themselves, those harsh words were protecting her, making the distance between her and this strange woman wider. The nervous tension which had been between them now took shape in Regina's alienating words.

Emma looked like she had been slapped and was ready to slap back. "Okay, sister, you have been nothing but shitty to me from day one and I'm getting a bit tired of it. I thought it was just you being snobby and a bit reserved but I'm starting to think you're just a hostile bitch! Do you have something against people who aren't rich or something? Or maybe Americans? What the hell is it about me that pisses you off so much?"

Regina scoffed and crossed her arms over her chest. "Firstly, there's your appalling use of language. You are in my employ, I expect you to speak to me accordingly. Respect and a small modicum of deference wouldn't go amiss."

"Hey, I've been plenty polite before! You just pushed me too far. All I did was look at some pictures while you packed up those weird books. I see no reason for you to get all bitchy about it. I've looked away from them now and I'll stay away from your stuff until we leave the flat, okay?"

Emma's words were meant to nip the trouble in the bud and get them on their way to the station and Regina knew what she should do. She should take the way out she was offered, give a dignified apology and move on. But she couldn't. She felt tongue-tied and unable to think of the normal way to phrase such an apology without humiliating herself. Her palms itched as they always did when she was anxious. She thought back to that picture Emma had been looking at. Her teenage years had been filled with this feeling. Wanting to reach out to her classmates, wanting to be likable but constantly pushing people away and saying the wrong thing. Saying the thing which would make people avoid her.

The voices of her parents warred in her mind. Her father smiling sadly and prompting her to be kind and to just be herself. Her mother telling her that making friends was only beneficial if those friendships could be used for something. Was this person of any use? Did they have connections? Money? Maybe they had some skills that could be learned? If so, charm them. If not, move on. When in doubt, get rid of them fast before they used you. Before they got too close.

Regina clenched her jaw shut tight. How do you force the hesitant words to come out without sounding like a rambling idiot? Could she apologize to this beautiful and strangely charming woman without sounding like an imbecile? No, best to say nothing at all. Do what Emma suggested, get to the station and drop off the books. Then they could part ways and Regina could rebuke her hostile brain over a glass of wine or five in peace.

"You're right, Miss Swan. We will get these books to the station and then I'm sure you have leads to pursue, now that we know what the burglars were after."

Emma sucked her teeth quickly and headed for the door. "Yeah, you know what. Why don't you head over there with the books, I'm gonna go *pursue some leads*. I'll call you later to report in."

She was hoping that Regina was going to stop her and apologize or at least explain why she was being such a royal pain in the ass. But the brunette just took a deep breath, something that Emma realised she had never seen Regina do before.

Regina swallowed and then spoke. "Yes, of course. That is probably best, I wouldn't want the police to wonder why I drag my oblivious, American neighbour around with me everywhere. Thank you for accompanying me home. I will let you know what the police say when they get the books."

"Great. Thanks," Emma murmured and closed the door behind her.

Regina squeezed her eyes closed and quietly cursed in Spanish. Then she squared her shoulders and let her thoughts clear her worried mind. *You are Regina Mills. You don't need to worry what some insolent vagrant thinks about you. She only works for you, nothing more. It doesn't matter.*

But it did matter.

And it left a sour taste in her mouth and an aching in her stomach as she travelled back into the heart of the city with the books safely stowed in the Tate Modern bag.

Somehow it mattered so much more than it should.

The wanderer

Emma was doing push-ups. She always worked out when she was pissed off, it kept her from doing something rash. She stopped when she felt a muscle in her chest twinge as she pushed herself a little too hard. She gave an angry grunt and laid down on her stomach. She stared at the floor and absentmindedly realised that either Ruby or Eugenia must have been in here to clean as there was no dust in sight.

She huffed out a breath. God, Regina had really gotten under her skin. Why hadn't she just been the bigger person and apologized for looking at those pictures and somehow treading on her employer's toes? She could have gotten to the bottom of why Regina was angry if she had just kept her cool and done the one thing that Regina clearly couldn't: swallowed her pride. She grunted again as she realised the answer, it was because Regina was so cold and measured about it.

Emma was great in a conflict but not if her opponent was composed and forbidding. It just made her feel like a child, always being told by some professional and detached grownup what she should do to be adopted or how she should behave to be loved by her new foster parents. Emma hated people who were so calculated, especially if she was being told off or criticized. If she could have figured out what was going on in Regina's snobby but clever brain, then she could have found a way to deal with it. She might have made them more comfortable with each other, perhaps even gotten the stuck-up she-devil to crack a smile. God, how gorgeous wouldn't that face be if it was smiling?

Emma groaned again but this time it wasn't out of anger but out of frustration at herself. Why did she have to find the rude bookseller so attractive? She had never been attracted to someone with a shitty personality before.

The door opened. "Em? Why are you on the floor and why are you making noises that made Granny want me to check if you were dying. Or a rhino. She said that the grunting must mean one of those things."

Emma chuckled mirthlessly. "Well I'm not dying but I might be a rhino. Are rhinos attracted to mates who are really awful?"

Ruby chortled and closed the door behind her. "Trouble with Ms Bookshop?"

"Yeah," Emma said in a pained voice as she sat up against the wall.

"Well the diner is pretty quiet. I can probably take a couple of minutes off. Wanna tell me what's wrong?"

"She's turning out to be even more grumpy and unpleasant than I first thought... and that's saying something," Emma replied as she combed her fingers through her tousled hair.

"So... why not just write her off and move on to the next hot British damsel in distress then?"

Emma groaned again but this time she kept the volume down. "I would, but my heart and my crotch really likes this woman. I don't know why. I meet a lot of women and the second I find out that they have horrible opinions or a mean streak or something like that... I stop being interested. I've met some smoking hot women but the second they turned out to be cruel to animals or racists or something - I found them really unattractive and wouldn't screw them even if I got a million bucks for it."

"But with Regina, that isn't the case," Ruby filled in.

"Exactly. I don't know why. I mean she was really rude and hostile today and she has the social skills of a viper but I... can't stop thinking about her. Granted, I'm mostly thinking about how I want to rub that superior, impassive look off her face but still, I keep thinking about her. Why didn't I stop being attracted to her?"

Ruby sat down on the bed and shrugged. "The answer is simple. Something inside you senses that she's not really that awful. I mean, granny likes her and she's usually a good judge of character. She says that Regina has fire in her. I didn't bother to ask what that means but feel free to get an explanation next time you speak to her."

Emma gave a non-committal hum. "I don't know, Rubes. Maybe I should give up this case and stay away from her? I really don't want to end up falling for a chick with serious issues. I'm not stable enough for that."

Ruby gave a sad smile. "Did you hear yourself then? You said you didn't want to deal with a woman who had issues and then you admitted that *you* have issues."

"So? What are you trying to tell me," Emma asked defensively.

"Just that we all have quirks and bad sides. Most people hide them from others until they know each other better. But maybe you and this Regina can't do that because your issues are too close to the surface. They're kinda obvious when any social relationship starts up, if you catch my drift? She's defensive to the point of being hostile and pushes people away and you're afraid of commitment and run away when things get complicated. Sounds to me like you two would show your cards pretty early on in the game."

Emma looked at Ruby but her mind was busy doing the math. "So, if that was the case... I have already seen Regina's worst side and everything else would be the nice parts of her personality?"

Ruby shrugged again. "I don't know, I've only ever waved to the woman. Maybe she is all bad personality traits and you just saw the first one. Or maybe you just accidentally stepped on the landmine which blew up and showed her biggest flaw? You said that she has a best friend, right? If I were you I would ask her."

A shout came from downstairs. "RUBY!"

Ruby got up from the bed. "Shit! I guess granny did need me after all. Gotta go."

Emma was just about to thank her but Ruby had already rushed down to the diner. Emma thumped her head against the wall behind her. Rubes was right, her own worst trait did show up quickly in any relationship, be it friendly or romantic. She ran when things got hard or too intimate. There were friends and lovers left in several corners of the world who hated that Emma had just taken off and never contacted them again. Many of them hadn't done anything wrong. They had just gotten too close.

Emma had seen a therapist for a few weeks back in New York, he had called her *the Wanderer*. He had asked her if she thought about what her actions looked like from the outside. She had gone home and thought about it and realised that the friends she never called again and the exes she had just walked out on must think she was a grade A bitch. Just what she had been calling Regina in her head since she stormed out of the apartment.

There had been a problem and Emma had run away from the conflict like she always did. Maybe Regina had been pushing her away because that was her defence mechanism and she with her tendency to flee had immediately rushed off, showing her own defence mechanism.

She was going to have to get to the bottom of this. She had to figure it out at the same time as she solved this mystery with the books. There was a whole lot of unanswered questions here and she was the right woman to figure out the answers. However, considering her own strong emotions on the matter she should start with figuring out how to deal with Regina on a daily basis without them punching each other. Ruby was right, she should start with talking to Mary.

She decided to google Regina and Mary and see if she could find out any info about the former and a way of contacting the latter. She lifted the lid of her old, battered laptop and pushed the ON button. As always it took ages to turn on and she tried to stifle her impatience.

Her phone buzzed from the pocket of her leather jacket. Emma hurried over to it and looked at the screen which read; *Regina Mills*. She took a deep breath and replied.

"Hey Regina."

"Good afternoon. I just wanted to keep you in the loop. I dropped off the books. Constable Locksley informed me that they are going to examine the text and probably bring in an expert on codes and encryption."

"Really? So they think the book might be written in code?"

"Apparently so. He was talking about the book being in code and hinted that organized crime gangs sometimes use codes from books for times and locations for illegal weapon sales and drug deals. It sounds rather farfetched to me."

Emma scoffed. "Yeah, me too. I'm not sure Constable Locksley is the best crime solver in London's fine police core to be honest. Hopefully they'll transfer your case over to someone higher up now that there has been a threat involved."

Regina sounded tired as she replied. "Perhaps. If they leave me with only Constable Locksley I'll assume that they don't take my case seriously. I'm glad that I decided to hire a private detective, if I'm to be completely frank. I'm hoping you will have some more likely theories to work on."

A small, wry smile tugged at the corners of Emma's mouth. Was that Regina's way of showing her gratitude for Emma's involvement or was it just her doubting the efficiency of Locksley?

"Yeah well, now that the books are safe with the police, what about you?"

There was a pause before Regina replied. "What about me?"

"Well, those people will come looking for the books and they won't find them. Don't you think they might come after you instead?"

Regina sounded reticent as she replied. "The police want me to stay at a hotel for the next few nights. They don't take the veiled threats of that note too seriously, but they asked me to leave a note of my own on the door of the shop informing them that the books have been handed over to the metropolitan police and that I am no longer of any interest to them. I did that but I am not staying at a hotel. I can never get a good night's sleep in them."

Emma felt a knot of worry in her stomach. "You mean you're gonna say at your flat? What if those guys were serious and they get pissed off because you gave the books to the cops?"

"I'm staying with Mary for the moment. She lives on the far reaches of Greater London out in Harrow. I should be *entirely* safe out there. She'll be glad for the company since Henry and David are still in Ireland."

Emma chewed her lip and tried to suppress the question of if the people wanting the books might not know about Regina's only friend and be able to track her down. The last thing she wanted to do was overstep her mark and piss Regina off again.

"Alright. I want to do some research and then talk to you about the books a little bit more, if that's okay? I just feel we are missing something here. I mean why would organized crime pick a bunch of obscure books to use for their codes? And then go to all that trouble of stealing them when they could have used anything else as a code system. Unless the books spell out where a pirate treasure is buried I see absolutely no reason for any criminals to want them this bad. It makes no sense."

"Yes, that's fine. I will send you the address to Mary's house in a text. You can get here by tube."

"Great. I'll dig around a bit and then come see you," Emma said as she realised that her laptop had come alive during the conversation. She

began typing in 'This unkindness of ravens' into Google.

"Alright. Oh, and I wanted to say..." there was a pause as Regina seemed to struggle with what to say. "Well...I wanted to wish you good luck, Miss Swan."

Emma frowned. That was clearly not what Regina had wanted to say. Maybe an apology had been on its way after all? Or maybe another scolding?

"Thanks. I'll see you later then, probably after dinner?"

"That sounds fine," Regina said in clipped tones.

"Cool."

"Yes, good."

Silence ticked on for a few excruciating seconds. It was Regina who finally broke it.

"Speak soon," she said rapidly and hung up.

Emma rolled her eyes at her phone. This was like pulling teeth. She looked at the screen of her laptop and realised that Google had provided her with search results of books called *An unkindness of ravens*, some links to bird watching pages and loads of blogs, some scary as hell and some merely pretentious. She wasn't really surprised to not find anything about the weird books, there was no reason why anyone should mention them and they must be like 40 or 50 years old so they weren't old enough to be interesting to scholars or new enough to be interesting to the bloggers.

What she *was* surprised at was how fast she deleted the words in the search box and wrote 'Regina Mills' instead. She was equally surprised when she found herself ignoring all the search results to merely bring up a picture from an old article about women in the banking industry. There were three women in the picture and the one to the far right was none

other than Regina Mills in severe make-up and an elegant black suit. She looked daunting but unbelievably beautiful. Emma stared long enough until she could even pick out the pressed creases of Regina's suit trousers.

After a while she forced herself to look away and start googling criminals using old books for codes. But as she searched and made sceptical notes in a notebook, she kept seeing the picture of Regina in her mind. "Annoying, distracting, freaking goddess in a suit", she huffed to herself and rubbed her tired eyes before returning to her notes.

A little help from my friends

Emma got out of the tube and as she now had reception on her phone again, she looked at it for the twentieth time to double check the address that Regina had texted her. Why was she feeling so damn nervous? Was it always going to be this uncomfortable being around Regina Mills?

She walked fast, keeping her hands in her pockets to ward off the cold. She would have to buy a winter coat, a pair of gloves and a nice beanie at some point. Soon she reached the address and looked up at the rundown Georgian house which was the home of the Nolan's.

When she rang the doorbell it was Mary who opened.

"Oh hello Emma. Um, you're here a little earlier than we expected."

Emma winced. She had said she'd be there after dinner and it was just after four now, clearly they didn't expect her for a few hours yet. She had been too eager and nervous to consider that. "Right, crap, I'm sorry. I should have called or texted to let you know that I was on my way."

"No, that is fine. It's just that Regina just did some Pilates earlier and just went to have a quick bath. Come in anyway," Mary said and stepped aside to let Emma in.

Emma walked into a cramped hallway with lots of framed photos and a child's drawings adorning the walls. There were shoes and a few toys scattered on the floor.

"Sorry about the mess. We keep saying we need to buy more storage space to keep everything in but we never get around to it," Mary said with an apologetic smile.

Emma took her leather jacket off and hung it on a hook which already held a child's raincoat. "Hey, that's fine. I'm more comfortable in places

which feel cosy and relaxed anyway."

"Oh good! Right, would you like some tea? Or perhaps some coffee? It's cold out there, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is a bit chilly today. I'd love some coffee if it isn't any trouble?"

"Of course not! I warn you though, we only have instant as we're not coffee drinkers ourselves."

Emma said that was fine as she followed the short-haired woman into the kitchen. She had spent enough time in different parts of England through the years to be prepared for excellent tea but bad coffee.

"I'm afraid Regina will be quite a while in the bath, as I said; she just got in" Mary explained while she put the kettle on. "I can't tell you when she'll be out."

Emma looked down and noticed that her hands had begun to fidget with the hem of her shirt so she hid her hands in her pockets so Mary wouldn't see her nervousness. It was time to be honest and take a chance here.

"That's alright. Actually, that's kinda good because I have some questions for you."

Mary got two large mugs out, one saying 'World's best mum' and one saying 'Tea-rex' with a picture of a cartoon dinosaur. "Questions for me?"

Emma wondered how to phrase this. She couldn't just come out and ask if Regina was always a bitch or if it was just a protective front.

"Yeah. As you know I'm working for Regina now and I really want to do a good job, not just with the investigation but with how she and I work together. I just thought that I'd check in with you about how to...you know, get along with Regina."

Mary frowned a little. Emma realised that the idea of a stranger being so forthright about pressing her for information was probably alien to her. That and she was probably weighing what she could say without being disloyal to her best friend.

"I take it that you and Regina have run into a little trouble, then?"

Emma smiled kindly. "She's your friend, I'm sure she told you that I somehow managed to really piss her off in her apartment."

Mary hummed out a little chuckle. "You would be surprised at how little Regina confides in people in general, but yes... I got the gist from her bad mood and murmured expletives."

"So... you don't know what happened?"

"No, not exactly. But I assume that Regina behaved badly in an attempt to keep you at arm's length. That is what usually happens," Mary said exasperatedly.

"Yeah, I think that was pretty much it. She caught me looking at a picture of her as a kid and she kinda blew up on me."

Mary smiled. "Ah. Yes, that explains it. I'd guess you got too close and you accidentally made her uncomfortable. I'd apologize for whatever she said to you but it's really not my place. Neither is me giving you advice on how to handle the situation. Regina is fiercely loyal and discreet and she expects the same from me."

Emma held out her hands. "Oh man, I'm not asking you to tell on her or give me exact instructions on how to charm her! Sorry, if I gave that impression. I just wondered if there was something I should do, or make sure to *not* do, to make sure that doesn't happen again?"

Mary poured the boiling water into the two mugs and placed a tea bag in one of them and two spoonfuls of instant coffee in the one with a dinosaur on.

"Honestly? I can only recommend patience and not taking it personally when she gets snappy. She can't help it and she regrets that she does it, but it's just the way she is. If you had met her mother and seen how Regina was raised, you'd understand. She will be less prickly if the two of you become better acquainted, though."

"I hope so. I, well, I'm gonna come clean here and say that I think I could... really like her. I know that neither you nor she knows anything about me but basically I'm a constant traveller looking for a home and I haven't been as interested in someone as I am in her for... well, as long as I can remember."

Mary looked unsure for a moment and it took a while for her to reply. "Thank you for your honesty."

Emma sighed. "That's a polite British way of telling me I'm barking up the wrong tree, huh? Is she involved with someone else? Or not into women? Or, you know, does she dislike me as much as she seems to?"

"No, she's single, bisexual and... probably as fascinated by you as you are by her," Mary said and then pointed to the two mugs. "Milk or sugar?"

"No thanks, black is fine," Emma replied as she chewed her lower lip.

Mary poured four heaped spoons of sugar into her own tea, removed the teabag, stirred it with a pensive look and then brought the mugs over.

Suddenly she chuckled, as if she just thought of something funny.

"Actually, as you are a detective, what you should do is figure out what she does every Sunday."

Emma's brow furrowed. "Every Sunday?"

Mary blew on her hot tea. "Yes. Regina has some sort of silly secret. I can tell that it's not serious by the way she talks about it but I also know that she refuses to tell me what she does. That's not uncommon though, she always thinks I'm going to tease her about things. And I usually do."

Still... if the secret is something that you two could share... well... that might be a way to past Regina's high walls."

Emma's sea-green eyes lit up. "You think?"

Mary looked up from her cup of tea and her kind eyes were suddenly serious. "I do. But... I would hate to have divulged anything about Regina's life, just for it to be used in a way which is not beneficial to her."

"Um. I'm... not sure what you mean."

Mary sighed. "I suppose what I mean is that you have to be kind to her and only use this information if you are certain it won't push her further away or invade her privacy. I love her and I would like her to have a chance to...well, make a new friend. But I would never forgive myself if I spilled some big secret and it ended up hurting her."

Emma held up her hands in front of her. "Say no more. I will follow her on Sunday and see what she does, if it's something that seems too private I will leave immediately and never breathe a word about it to anyone. You have my word on that."

"Good. Oh and me not wanting her to be hurt is a general note by the way. Regina may not have a big brother who will come after you with a cricket bat if you break her heart, but I'm pretty deadly with an Encyclopaedia Britannica."

Emma gave a genuine smile. "Message received and understood. If Regina gets hurt I get a heavy book to the head, gotcha."

Mary took a sip of her tea, slurping slightly to cool the drink. Emma followed suit and had some of her coffee. It was disgusting but she was glad to have something to do. She was still reeling over how well this was going, she actually had something to go on and confirmation from Regina's best friend that there probably was some interest from the brunette's side.

They were both quiet for a while and sipped their hot drinks.

"So... did you actually want to discuss something with Regina or did you just come here to grill her best friend?"

Emma had to laugh. "Uh, well I did want to talk to her about the case, yeah. But it can wait. I mainly wanted to get to know her better, and as she doesn't seem that interested in making that easy for me, a friend suggested I should talk to you about her."

Mary sniggered into her tea and then put the mug down. "Let me get this right, your bestie told you to talk to her bestie to find out if she likes you? Are we all teenagers now?"

Emma theatrically covered her eyes with her hand. "Looks like it, yeah. Sorry 'bout that. I'm really bad at this stuff."

"No, no... it's not a problem. I'd like to see Regina be less lonely and if this is what it takes to achieve that, then so be it."

Emma blew out a breath and smiled before taking another sip of her coffee.

Mary looked at her with a mischievous smile. "So, do you want to make a run for it now or do you want to be here when Regina comes out of the bathroom wearing only a towel?"

Most of the colour drained from Emma's face in an instant. "Oh shit! I hadn't thought of that. She'd probably be embarrassed and pissed off at me again, huh? Um, okay, um... tell her that I came by but that you said that she was in the bath so I'll... um..."

"Ring her later," Mary suggested helpfully.

"Yeah, that," Emma said and abandoned her coffee to go put her leather jacket on.

"I'll see you out," Mary said with only a hint of a grin.

Emma threw the jacket on and opened the door. "So, um, thanks for the coffee. And you know... the tip... about Sundays."

"Not a problem on either account. Just remember what I said though, use the information to make Regina happy or you'll have me and my husband to deal with and while he is a teddybear, he is also a broad-shouldered bloke who plays rugby," Mary said with a warning look.

"I promise I will try to make sure that neither she nor I get hurt. Thanks again!"

Emma waved and hurried off towards the tube station. Mary waved back and then closed the door with a sigh and a shake of her head.

As she walked back through the hallway she stopped by some of the photos on the wall. There was a picture of Henry Mills which was taken on Regina's 18th birthday. Mary focused on Henry's kind face and directed her thoughts to him.

Did you see that? What was it you said to me last time we spoke about Regina? She has a wounded soul and a hungry heart, wasn't it? Well I think she might have found someone who suffers from the same issues. If those two are going to get anywhere they will need to be helped along. I hope I did the right thing. I know I shouldn't meddle but you know how lonely she gets. I just want to see her happy again.

She headed upstairs to look for the woman in question and tell her about Emma's visit. Regina was out of the bath and wearing a big fluffy bathrobe that Mary had let her borrow. She seemed to be surveying her eyes in the bathroom mirror and as Mary watched she used her fingertips to pull at the skin which had started to form slight crow's feet at the corners of her eyes.

Mary sighed and looked at her childhood hero. Regina has such grace, generosity, intelligence and she loved so loyally when she allowed herself the chance. But for all that, she never seemed to see what was good for her.

"I've helped you along a bit. You better not mess this up, you silly cow," Mary whispered lovingly.

Regina kept inspecting the lines by her eyes as she replied. "Pardon? You really have to stop mumbling all the time, dear. One day I'll miss something important."

Mary chuckled. "I was just saying that you can't stare the wrinkles away. They are there to stay and you are still unfairly attractive with them so stop fretting."

Regina hummed unconvinced and Mary left her to it. She had to go see what they could have for supper tonight and figure out if she should keep encouraging this possible relationship or not. She could tell Regina about Emma's visit when she was dressed and came downstairs.

As Mary walked down to the kitchen she knew what Henry would say, he always claimed that the act of loving was always worth any pain or risk. She sighed again. *Right. A big meal for Regina's hungry heart it is, then.*

Non Omnis Moriar and Shephard's pie

The fire crackled in a way which would have been cosy in any other setting. In fact, the entire ambiance in the smoking room of the Oldboy club was inviting. Big, comfortable armchairs, plush Persian rugs, muted lights in ornate sconces, large bookshelves and mahogany coffee tables.

Normally this room would have been full of members of the club on a Friday night like this. There would be old professors debating, former politicians boasting and everyone else having a nap after having too much brandy. And that had been the case up until this moment.

Right now the four men, dripping with power and menace, stood quietly and looked at the rest of the members. So the other Oldboys all filtered back out to the bar area or perhaps even home to their sleeping wives. As the last arthritic professor closed the heavy door behind him the oldest of the four, John Withers, spoke.

"What are the developments with the police?"

The man next to him, Walter Darby, cleared his throat before replying. "My sources inside the met say that the matter of the communication with demands that we gave Ms Mills has not been brought to the attention of the higher ranks."

"That is surprising," Withers said with a frown.

Darby hummed his agreement. "Yes, it seems that the constable finding the evidence is trying to go it alone, so to speak.

The third man, Christopher Steel, who just sat down in one of the armchairs replied, "that sort of behaviour will probably cost him his position."

Withers shrugged. "Most likely. It is to our advantage though. Do we know of the constable's motive?"

Darby ran his hand over his bald scalp, tidying up the few strands of hairs that still remained. "No. Although I would wager that he is either trying to be closer to a solution before he brings it to his superiors or he has some vested interest in the case?"

"Like what?" The question came from the fourth man, Carlos Llanza, an obese man with a vague accent.

"My source said that he has been heard speaking about the *dignity and beauty* of the owner of the bookshop," Darby replied with a leer.

Llanza chuckled. "Ah, I see. Stirrings of the loins or even worse; of the heart."

"Yes, so it would seem. However, I fear that there is other news from my source within the police and this is not so... benign."

"Well... spit it out, man," Steel said impatiently and leaned forward in his chair.

"The woman, this *Regina Mills*, has foolishly handed the books over to them."

Steel gave an angry grunt, Llanza sighed deeply and the other two quietly looked at each other.

After a moment Withers went over to a small side table and poured himself half a glass of port from the decanter. It seemed to be something to do as he pondered their situation more than an actual wish for a drink. He drained the glass in one forceful gulp and then turned back to his associates.

"All is not lost. If this Robin Locksley has yet to hand over the note to his commanding officers, that must mean that he hasn't handed the books over yet either. He must be our next target."

Darby once again ran his hand over his head. "From what I hear the man prides himself on his honour."

Steel scoffed. "An honour which obviously doesn't stretch as far as to his Scotland Yard superiors."

Withers waved the comment away with a veined and wrinkled hand. "Even a man with honour can be bought, you just entice him with something else than money."

Carlos Llanza walked over to Withers to pour himself a glass of port as well. Llanza's glass was filled to the brim and he took little sips of the dark red liquid before asking, "what are you suggesting?"

Withers looked at the open fire as he spoke. "Well... I am sure that constable Locksley has some form of family."

"A wife, I believe," Darby supplied.

"Then we pay him off by allowing his wife to live," Withers said and placed his empty glass back on the small table.

All four were silent for a while. Blackmailing a man by threatening to kill his wife wasn't a new tactic to any of them and so their silence was more due to scheming than to any guilty consciences.

"I can get the message to him via my contact within the met. Christopher, would you mind drafting a brief communication as it is your area of expertise? I will make sure it ends up on Constable Locksley's desk on Monday morning," Walter Darby finally said.

Christopher Steel nodded solemnly and sank back down into his armchair.

The four once more fell silent and still. The only movement being Withers slowly turning his ring over in his palm. They all had a ring like it and each band wore the same inscription; Non Omnis Moriar – the Latin phrase written by Horace meaning 'Not all of me shall die'. It was

their motto and represented what they had spent the last three decades striving for. But it would all be lost without those books.

Regina placed her paper napkin in her lap "So, why did you decide on Shephard's pie?"

Mary looked up from her plate. "I thought it would make a nice change from all your take-away sushi and posh, lean-cuisine cooking."

"Oh, it does. I wasn't criticising the supper you made us. I was just wondering why you chose it for a Friday night meal," Regina said and daintily ate her first bite.

"Well, David doesn't like it so I don't make it when the boys are home and I suppose I thought it would make a nice nostalgic meal for us."

Suddenly Regina laughed. "Actually, you're right. I remember the first time I ate this. It was the time you decided to cook for your father and my parents when you were 17. You made your beloved Shephard's pie and then we all got the joy of watching Mother look at it like it was roadkill."

Mary laughed too. "And dad, Henry and you all made a point of talking about how delicious it was and you could see how it was killing Cora that she couldn't complain about it being common and uncouth. I mean it's not like I served you all beans on toast or something!"

Regina gave her friend a glowing smile. "It *was* delicious and it still is. You know... It was always a great relief to both me and Daddy when you gave her something else to complain about than us. It was so nice to have a moment's reprieve. I'm just sorry if she made your life hell."

Mary swallowed down a forkful of pie. "Oh, don't worry about that. You were much worse!"

"Mary! I was not! I might have given you a hard time but that was just because I was a year older and you were... annoyingly cheerful all the

time."

"Still am," Mary pointed out with a proud flourish of her fork.

"Yes. Luckily I still love you," Regina said monotonously and had a sip of her red wine.

"Oh, don't forget that Emma is going to ring tonight," Mary reminded before taking another bite.

"No, I haven't forgotten. I still can't believe she showed up just when I had gotten in the bath."

Mary swallowed her food quickly and grinned. "You're lucky I didn't send her in to talk to you. I don't know which of you would have blushed to death first."

Regina glared at her friend as she put the wineglass down with a conversation-stopping thump and a scowl.

"Fine, no talking about the possible romance with the leggy blonde. Shall we talk about the weather instead?"

Regina grimaced at her hostess and took a big bite of food to show her unwillingness to talk. Mary just smiled at her and carried on eating in silence as well.

Belle, books and the lost temper

Saturday morning had arrived and Regina had decided to open up the shop again. After all, Saturday was the day when most of her regulars came in and considering how badly the shop was doing, it couldn't go without their steady custom.

The andante movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 was playing quietly in the background. It had always been Henry's habit of having soft classical music playing in the shop on Saturdays and Regina decided to honour the tradition. Classical music had been one of the few interests her parents had shared.

Henry had loved it in its own right and had spent many years learning about it when he fell in love with it in his twenties. Cora on the other hand had been brought up in an upper middle class home where classical music had been seen as a sign of refinement and not entertainment. She could differentiate between Brahms and Elgar at an early age, not because she enjoyed either but because she had been taught that she could use it to impress people.

Regina had stubbornly stuck to her father's true *love* of the classical genre and she enjoyed it for its diversity and strong emotions. But then she also loved Pet Shop Boys with a passion, proving that she had always had an eclectic taste in music.

She stood by the counter and recalled the phone call with Emma last night. It had been awkward. The tension had still been there but there had been something else, Emma had sounded patient and not at all as annoyed as Regina would have expected. It was odd and extremely relieving all at once. Regina had been convinced that there would be another argument. Still, there had been awkward moments.

" So... I came by to see you earlier today. But you were busy. In the bath."

" Y-yes. I did hear voices from downstairs but I assumed Mary had the radio on."

" Right. Okay. Well no, it was me."

Regina winced at the memory. Two grown women reduced to pointless statements and nervous stuttering.

Nevertheless, Emma had done some research online and while there had been no actual progress, Regina still felt calmer knowing that Emma was still looking into it. The American might have her faults but for some reason Regina felt confident with leaving this entire mess in the blonde's hands. Her long-fingered and smooth-skinned hands. *No, let's not think about her hands. That just leads to inappropriate thoughts*, Regina admonished her wilful mind with a grimace. She forced it to change topic and pondered when her delivery of new books was arriving. The publisher had said 'Saturday morning' but Regina hated that kind of vagueness.

The bell above the door suddenly chimed and Regina looked up to greet the day's first customer. It was Isabelle, the young librarian who was obsessed with poetry. Regina smile at her and the smile was genuine. This woman was one of her favourite customers, she bought lots of books and was pleasant but never prone to unnecessary small talk.

"Good morning Regina. I'm glad to see the shop is open again. I went by on my bike yesterday and noticed that the place was closed."

"Good morning Isabelle. How are you? Yes, I'm afraid I had another break in and the police, for certain reasons I probably shouldn't go into, asked me to keep the shop closed for the day."

"I'm fine. Oh and call me Belle. I keep telling you... anyone who ends up with as much of my pay check as you do, should call me what my friends call me. I'm sorry to hear you had another break in. Let me know

if I can help you in any way. I, and many others with me, love Henry's Books and we want to keep it open for business."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind," Regina said with a polite smile.

Isabelle went over to browse the poetry shelf and picked up a volume of Keats that she had admired many times before but put back, probably because of its steep price. Regina wondered if today was the day when Isabelle... Belle... would fall for its charm and invest.

The bell above the door sounded again.

"Hiya love. I've got a delivery for a place called Henry's Books. Is that here?"

Regina looked incredulously at the delivery guy. He was leaning on his sack truck and staring back at her vacantly while chewing gum.

She set her jaw. "Well, if you bothered to read the huge sign above the shop you would know where you are, you cretin. If you are not a fan of reading signs you could instead spot the word 'books' on the boxes under your hairy arm and notice that the room you are in is full of *books*, quite likely that those boxes belong here, yes?"

He glared at her. "Yeah, I'spose so. Right, sign here."

Regina took a deep, calming breath and signed the computerized pad with the worn out stylus he offered her.

"There, signed. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like the boxes delivered to the small backroom over there. Just put them anywhere, I'll unpack them later," Regina explained curtly.

He grunted and began to push the sack truck into the shop and towards the door to the backroom.

Isabelle gave a snigger as soon as he was inside the room and unloading the boxes. "I'm not certain he deserved that, but I must admit that it was quite amusing to watch."

Regina frowned. "You'll have to pardon me. I am still not quite used to being in a service profession and sometimes my temper spills over."

"I suppose it's better that it spills over at a lethargic delivery guy than at your customers," Belle said with a wink.

Regina chuckled. "Yes, I suppose so. I'm sorry you had to witness it though. I do need to learn to control my temper and my... unfortunate tendency to be rude."

"Yeah, no shit," muttered the delivery guy who now headed back to his van with an empty sack truck.

Regina stared after him in shock at his bluntness. Belle sniggered again.

"Never mind him. You know what? I think today is the day when I adopt this gem," the librarian said and handed Regina that volume of Keats collected poetry she had been drooling over.

Regina snapped back into business mode and smiled politely at Belle. "Of course. Good choice! Food for the soul and gorgeous on a bookshelf."

Belle smiled happily. "I'm glad to hear you say that because I intend to give it to my... well, boyfriend... on our one year anniversary next week."

"Oh my. Congratulations," Regina said as she put the book through the till.

"Thank you. I'm a very lucky woman. I found a man as crazy about old books as I am. He's a collector of unusual antiques but what he really loves is rare books."

"I see. I'm sure he counts himself just as lucky to have found someone who shares his passion," Regina said as she put the book in a small plastic bag and handed it and the receipt over to the blushing librarian.

Belle smiled even larger now. "I hope so. Thank you, Regina. I hope you have a good day and no further problems with burglars."

"So do I," said Regina with a quirked eyebrow and a sigh.

Isabelle gave a demure wave and left the shop. Regina was left pondering what the other woman had said. *An expert on rare books*. Maybe that was what she and Emma needed to shed some light on this case?

She stood there a while and considered calling Emma and suggesting it but then she lost her nerve. It wasn't like her to hesitate but her outburst towards the delivery guy just now had her spooked. She had to admit that she was frightened of snapping at Emma again and driving the blonde away.

Anyway, she had no way of contacting Belle to ask her for an introduction to this book expert of a boyfriend and the librarian would be long gone on her bicycle by now. She decided to bring the idea up the next time she spoke to Emma instead and to focus on getting that empty shelf filled with new books now. Soon some of the other regulars would come in and hopefully Regina could convince them to leave with a few Nordic Noir or Chick lit books.

Some Sunny Sunday Stalking

The Sunday was crisp and sunny. Emma was sitting in a Patisserie Valerie opposite Regina's apartment building. She was keeping an eye on the large glass door, as soon as Regina Mills strode out through it, she was going to follow her.

Emma had sat there all morning, with a cappuccino and no less than eight macaroons, pondering Mary's plan of getting her in behind Regina's high walls by finding out her little Sunday ritual. She was starting to lean towards that it was a mistake. She had just decided to skip it and go home when she saw Regina emerge from the tall building.

Her beauty hit Emma like a painless blow to the jaw. The bookseller was wearing a thick tweed jacket over a white cable knit jumper with black jeans and she had her dark hair in a casual ponytail. Her make-up was more subtle than Emma had seen it before and she looked relaxed and well-rested. She was walking fast and her high-heeled, mocha boots were pounding the pavement.

Even if Emma hadn't wanted to follow her before; now she would. She had to see more of this Sunday edition of Regina. After all, she never said she would *talk* to Regina, just see what she does every Sunday. Where was the harm in that?

She started to discreetly follow Regina while her mind continued to race in the same tracks it had all morning. This Sunday ritual had to be some kind of guilty pleasure, right? If she told her best friend about the habit but refused to say what it was to avoid being teased about it? What could it be? Interpretive dance classes? Indulging a comic book obsession? A knitting group at the local library? Feeding pigeons in Hyde Park?

It could be anything as Emma didn't know this woman. *That's the point, dummy. You are meant to get to know her without her feeling that you are prying*, Emma thought to herself and picked up her pace to not lose the fast-walking brunette.

They hurried down the street and then Regina made a turn into a small side road. Emma followed at a reasonable distance and realised that unlike most other people on the road, Regina didn't seem lost in thought, wasn't checking her phone or listening to music as she walked. The brunette was totally focused on the here and now. Emma respected that even if she couldn't relate, she would have been blaring Imagine Dragons in her headphones if she had a long walk ahead.

As they turned again they arrived on another big, busy road. After a while of walking a bearded young man stepped in front of Emma. He was quite obviously a chugger; one of the city's ever-growing group of so called charity-muggers – people who harassed passing city dwellers until they donated to their cause.

"Hey there! Got a sec? We're collecting money to save the quickly dwindling population of pygmy goats in St Ives."

Emma brushed the young man off with a murmured, "I already donated online."

He scowled at her, clearly not buying that old lie. "Oh come on.... Just a few quid? It's only what you'd spend on posh coffees and would make all the difference for them," the chugger persisted.

"Look. I'm really busy and I have to go, alright? I'll come back this way and give you some loose change later. Now get the hell out of my way," Emma barked at him.

"Fine. Just don't regret it tonight when you try to sleep and your conscience won't let you," he said with a disappointed look.

Emma just nodded and hurried after Regina. But... she seemed to have vanished. Emma cursed in her head and sped up again, her green eyes

quickly scanning the streets. She decided that Regina must have turned a corner up ahead and quickly rushed that way.

Just to turn the corner and come face to face with Regina.

The sun glinted off her shiny coffee-coloured hair and her face was arranged in an eerily composed look of rage. Regina crossed her arms over her chest and quirked an eyebrow before speaking.

"You know, I wouldn't have known you were there if it wasn't for the fact that I heard your accent and then recognized your voice. You really should have just pushed the chugger aside and stayed focused on the task at hand. I assume that following me was your task? I can't see why else you would be in this part of town and hurrying after me."

Emma's mind was racing fast. *Think, Swan. Option one; you lie and say that you are following her to make sure she stays safe. Option two: you tell the truth because you are meant to be doing this to get closer to her and doing that on the back of a lie is creepy. Yeah. Has to be option two.*

"Yeah. I'm sorry. I knew this was a bad idea but I couldn't resist," Emma said with a frown.

"Following me sounds like a very bad idea, yes. It also sounds like an idea you probably didn't come up with on your own. How did you know I would be going out today?"

"Would you believe me if I said it was a lucky guess?"

Regina paused and peered at Emma. "No. I'd just believe that you are reticent about getting *Mary* into trouble. She knows I go out every Sunday and that I prefer not to tell her where I go, she must have put you up to this."

Emma winced. "Yeah."

Regina made a concerted effort to keep herself from grinding her teeth.
"Would you like to enlighten me regarding her reasons?"

"I... um... I wanted to get to know you better so I asked her for advice and she suggested that I find out your guilty pleasure and kinda use that to..."

"Worm your way into my life?"

"Shit, it sounds really bad when you say it like that."

"Yes. That is because it is really bad, Emma. Right. Come on. We are going to my flat to discuss this."

Emma made a quick whining noise. "Really?"

"Really. I cannot have this discussion here, I was raised to never raise my voice in public."

"Oh. It's gonna be that kind of discussion," Emma said dejectedly.

"Exactly, now come along," Regina replied in clipped tones.

They re-traced their steps in silence and Emma frantically tried to figure out why the hell she was traipsing along like a shamed puppy just to be taken somewhere where she would be shouted at. Why didn't she just apologize and then take off? *Because you want Regina to like you*, a niggling little voice in her mind explained. Emma frowned and followed Regina, who was walking with even more speed and determination now.

Emma gritted her teeth. Why the hell had she agreed to this ludicrous stalking-idea? It had sounded sensible when Mary said it. And after all, Mary was the person who was meant to know Regina the best and if she said "follow her on Sundays" clearly that was the thing to do. Only... it clearly wasn't.

They were finally by the apartment door. Regina scrambled for her keys in the deep pockets of her jacket, this meant that she got out the other

two things that were in there and briefly held them in her hands as she fished the keys out. Emma saw that the other two items were a folded up twenty pound note and what looked like a little thick paper card that said *Zahid's news & off license* or maybe it was *Zabid's news & off license*, Emma only saw it briefly so she couldn't be sure if it was an H or a B. Could that be where Regina went on Sundays? But then what was the card? What sort of news shop, or off license for that matter, gave out some form of cards?

As soon as they were inside Regina hung her coat up, unlaced her boots and placed them neatly on the shoe rack. Then she set her jaw and turned to look at Emma, who was still scrambling out of her pair of beaten-up, leather Converse.

"So. Would you care to explain to me exactly what is going on?"

"I...I... well, it's like I said back there. I couldn't figure you out. You seemed sorta charming one second and then you bit my head off in the next one. A friend of mine suggested I talk to Mary and ask her how I could, you know, get to know you better without pissing you off or making you put up your walls as a defence mechanism because someone was... well, trying to get in."

Regina's lip curled and her breathing was rapid, but her voice sounded forcibly calm. "And Mary suggested stalking me?"

"No! No, it wasn't like that. She said that you are a wonderful person, just... kinda guarded and likely to lose your temper. She suggested that I find out what you do on Sundays to get to know you in an indirect way and see if it might be something we could share. She was trying to help because she could tell that we were miscommunicating."

"Right! So naturally, invading my privacy and trying to pry out my secrets seemed like a good idea to you both," Regina said in a voice which had now grown as loud as Emma feared it would.

Emma winced and looked down at the plush rug. "For the record I had doubts and I'm sure she did too. It was just that neither of us could think

of another way at the time. But yeah... I had doubts all morning and I should have listened to them. I have to say though, Mary made me promise that I would stop following you instantly if it was something serious or private. And I really would have."

Regina was balling her hands into tight fists by her sides. "Well, thank goodness for that at least! And your interest in getting closer to me was for the benefit of the case?"

Emma bit her lip. It was time. Do or die. Take the plunge. "No. It was because I'm attracted to you."

"Attracted to me?"

The scepticism and near-mockery in Regina's tone made Emma look up and kick-started feelings of defiance in her shamed heart.

"Yeah, attracted to you. Don't get me wrong, your behaviour is really shitty but you might just be the sexiest woman I have ever seen and quite frankly that is pissing me off! I wanna run a mile from you but I also want to know everything about you, particularly what's under those damn jeans!"

For the briefest of moments Regina was dumbfounded. Then she cleared her throat.

"I see. Well, I know that my way of behaving towards people can be... abrasive. In fact, I have become more aware of this lately and I know I need to work on that. However, that is NOT a reason for you to follow me and try to figure out my secrets." Regina's tone was still angry but her words showed surprising restraint.

Emma was squeezing her lips together so tightly they were almost turning white. "Okay, fine. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have followed you. I'll just give up on trying to get beyond that thorny exterior of yours and focus on the case, okay?!"

"No," Regina replied tersely and put her hands on her hips.

Emma scoffed in astonishment. "What? No?"

"No. Right now I need to go, a Sunday ritual is not a Sunday ritual if it does not happen every Sunday. However, we are not done with this conversation yet. Meet me here tonight. I'll cook dinner, we will talk about your idiotic behaviour and I'll fill you in on my proposal for how we might be able to find out more about *This Unkindness of Ravens*. Will 6 be too early for you?"

Emma stood still and silent in utter shock. Was she being invited to a date? Regina had brought her up here to shout at her and now she was asking her out?

Regina stared at her impatiently. "Well? You wanted to get to know me. This will be your chance to do that while we get on with more important things."

"I...I... um. Yeah, okay."

"Good. That's settled then. Do you like Moussaka?"

Emma realised she was still staring dumbly. "Um, yeah. Yeah, I do."

"Moussaka it is then. I've got the perfect wine to go with it. You will have a few hours to figure out how you are going to defend your and Mary's behaviour and then I'll see you tonight."

With that Regina went to hand Emma her Converse. Emma took them and put them on, she didn't bother lacing them up, she was still too stunned by the turn of events. She realised that she had forgotten to take her leather jacket off earlier and was now happy to be saved from having to stand there in the uncomfortable silence and put it on.

This situation was way too weird and she just wanted to get out of Regina's perfect, neat apartment and go somewhere where she could think. Just as the door closed behind her Regina said, "remember to be here at 6. You are in enough trouble without also being late."

Emma was left staring at the closed door before her sense kicked in and she began to leave. She decided to take the elevator. She was still so confused that she worried she might miss a step and tumble down the stairs if she attempted walking down. She now had a date which entailed her having to defend herself and talk about work. Was that still a date?

Was that still a date?

Chapter Notes

Author's note: I wouldn't read the following two chapters at work or in public.

Yes. Yes it was a date. Emma became certain of that when she saw Regina open the door in a stunning little black dress and impossibly high heels. Damn, she looked amazing.

"Come on in," Regina said with a hint of a smile. Clearly she had clocked Emma's reaction to the dress.

Emma walked past Regina in to the flat and was glad that she herself had made some effort. Not knowing if it was a date or not meant that she had tried to look acceptable for both a date and for a work-related meal. In Emma Swan's case this meant belted, grey skinny jeans, knee-high black boots and a fitted burgundy shirt. To shield her from the cold November evening, the shirt was covered with a thick, black blazer which was more wrinkled than she would like, but neither Eugenia nor Ruby had seemed to own an iron.

The burgundy shirt was unbuttoned quite a way down and Emma's red push-up bra gave a good view of the girls for anyone who was looking. And Regina was looking. Emma caught the chocolate brown eyes travel to her chest as she took the blazer off.

"I'm afraid I don't have a dining room so we won't have a lot of legroom at the small kitchen table," Regina said and pointed towards the kitchen.

"Oh that's fine. I'm used to eating anything anywhere."

"I'll keep that in mind," Regina said in a tone that Emma could have sworn was almost flirty.

Regina walked into the kitchen and Emma followed her. In a corner of the snug room was a table covered in a dove grey table cloth and with napkins in the same colour laid out on the two plates. Two wine glasses, and two small glasses already filled with water, were present and as Emma watched, Regina uncorked a bottle of red wine and placed it on the table.

Unable to stand the suspense any longer Emma asked the question foremost on her mind.

"So, how much trouble am I actually in?"

Regina scoffed. "Enough for you to have to explain yourself and little enough for you to still be invited to dinner and dessert."

Emma perked up a little. "Dessert?"

"Yes. My own crème brûlée with raspberry coulis. I hope that will be satisfactory? I decided against anything more adventurous as I don't know your tastes in food."

"Basically, if it has sugar and fat - I'm in!"

Regina laughed and the small kitchen filled with the melody of it. Emma felt herself relax, her hostess didn't seem pissed off, maybe a bit on edge but not furious at least.

A loud ringing got Regina's attention and she pushed a few buttons on her iPhone before opening the oven and taking out a very fragrant moussaka. Emma felt her stomach growl and realised how hungry she was. Regina served the moussaka, some sourdough bread on the side and large glasses of wine and Emma thanked her profusely before tucking in.

They ate in silence, Regina taking dainty little bites and ripping small pieces of bread while Emma shuffled the food in and revelled in how delicious it all was. When Emma's plate was clean she realised that she had forgotten about her wine. She took a sip, it was spicy and flavourful and not as bitter as Emma usually found red wine.

Regina watched the blonde sip her wine and then stood to clear the plates. She rinsed them and immediately put them in the dishwasher. Emma couldn't help but smile at how the meticulous woman obviously wouldn't leave dirty plates out during the next course of the meal.

"Shall we wait a while before having dessert or would you like it now?"

"Um, I'm still pretty stuffed. Mind if we wait?"

"Not at all. We can go sit on the sofa and discuss your interesting trick of stalking people to get to know them."

The comment hit Emma's belly like icy water. The cosy part of the dinner was clearly over: time to explain her actions.

She followed Regina into the next room and tried very hard to not look at her swaying rear in that body-hugging dress, it was insanely difficult and Emma caught herself glancing more than once. Regina sat down on the farthest end of the sofa, crossed her legs and clasped her hands in her lap.

Emma sat down on the other end and scratched the back of her head nervously.

"Yeah, so I have been thinking about how to explain my actions and honestly, I can't think of a better way of explaining it than I already have. What I told you this morning is basically the full story. I realise that it was a weird way of trying to get close to you, but you have to admit that you aren't directly approachable or likely to make small talk. So... I went with what your friend suggested."

"Agreed. It was mainly Mary's fault and your intentions were good," Regina interjected.

"I... hang on, what?"

"I am agreeing with you. I have had time to think and while it was a careless and stupid thing to do, I can see why you did it. If you apologise fully, I am inclined to accept it."

Emma stared at Regina open-mouthed. It was going to be that simple? "Uh. Okay. Um, I'm really sorry for the weird-ass way I used to try and get to know you better."

"Apology accepted. I have spent a large part of the afternoon shouting at Mary and getting her side of the story and I have decided to accept her apology too. Although, I will make her suffer for quite a while. I've just promised her to forego being aggressive and jump straight to being passive aggressive. She was happy enough with that."

"Alright. Well, I'm glad the two of you are good again. She was really just trying to help."

Regina rolled her eyes. "She always is, and that is usually when she causes the most trouble. Anyway, about the case. I've had an idea."

"Okay, cool. Shoot," Emma said and sat back more comfortably.

"I had one of my regular customers in today and she mentioned having a boyfriend who specialises in rare books. Perhaps we would be better off speaking to him than trying the internet? He might not know anything about these particular books but maybe he has a clue to what someone might want with them."

"Yeah. Or he might know the author of the books. You said he owned a publishing press, right?"

"Yes. That's what Daddy found out anyway. I don't think he normally dealt in fiction though, I think he mainly published and printed law

documents and such - oh, I can't remember. Yes, you're right. Perhaps he can shed more light on the author."

"Do you have a name?"

"For the author?"

"Well, I meant the regular's boyfriend but yeah, the author too."

"The author was called Joseph DeLuca. I'm afraid that I don't know the boyfriend's name, but Isabelle usually rides her bike from the library where she works past the shop every work day at 7.30 and every other Saturday at 4. I can try to flag her down and talk to her tomorrow at 7.30 if you think it's advisable?"

"I do. I think it's a great place to start. If she is alright with you seeing the boyfriend to talk about the books, would you mind if I tag along?"

"Not at all, in fact I would insist that you do."

"Okay, that's agreed then. That was quick and easy! We haven't even had dessert yet."

Regina brushed down her dress. "Well, I wanted to get it out of the way so we can get down to your real reason to come here."

Emma frowned in genuine confusion. "Uh-huh...um... and what is that?"

"Oh don't be coy, we are both adults."

Emma stared blankly.

Regina pursed her lips. "I'm referring to sex, of course."

Emma's eyes went big. "Whoa! Hold on. You think I came here just to jump into bed with you?"

"Naturally. Well, you also came to be told off for being a cretin and to talk about the case. However, you have admitted to being attracted to me

and spent an inordinate amount of time staring at my chest, arse and mouth – ergo, you came to... well... *come*."

Emma stood up and stared in disgust. "Jesus! You've got some nerve, lady! I mean, yeah, I'm physically attracted to you but that doesn't mean that I want some sort of clinical, automatic sex act nestled in between dinner and dessert! I've been trying to get to know you and that doesn't just mean in the carnal sense. I'm not some sex-crazed womanizer."

Regina looked a bit flustered at Emma's outburst but she kept her proud body language in place. "Perhaps not, but you are a bit of a bee fleeing from flower to flower across the world, right? I think we both know that you want to... *pollinate me*, to stay with the analogy."

Emma tried to keep her cool enough to keep her speech coherent. "Christ Regina! That is so conceited! And what the hell do you know about my life? Yeah, I travel a lot. And yeah, I am not great with commitment but I'm not some cheap sex-maniac and anyway... are you somehow slut-shaming me here?"

"No, dear. I'm trying to give you what you want and itch my own scratch in the process. I think a good session in bed would do us both good. We are clearly physically compatible considering our attraction but personality wise... we couldn't be more incompatible."

"So, what... you put on that hot dress and made me dinner while assuming that we were gonna fuck tonight? Just like that? All while I was stewing in fear that my explanation and apology wasn't going to be accepted?"

"What you were thinking is your problem, not mine. Us having sex makes sense for both of us. Granted, it would have been better if we waited until our business arrangement was concluded but I have considered that and I think it is a risk we can live with."

"This is not normal social behaviour, Regina! You can't just assume someone will sleep with you because you calculated that it should happen. My physical intimacy isn't part of some equation."

"I see. So you mean I should have followed the rules of some sort of mating game; talked about hobbies and played hard to get and just waste hours to then end up in bed anyway? I honestly thought that you knew this was where we were heading. You're a woman of the world and you have needs. You didn't strike me as the modest, decorous type."

Emma nearly saw red. The blood was pumping so hard in her veins that she could see them raising up at her wrists. Regina on the other hand was playing with one of her earrings as if nothing was the matter. She seemed so calm. Too calm.

Suddenly the penny dropped. "Hang on... you are trying to push me away again! This time by treating me like a cheap slut and making me think that you only want my body...well fine, if you just want me to fuck you then fine – come here!"

Emma's eyes glinted with fury as she extended a hand to Regina. The brunette hesitated for a moment. Their eyes met. The air in the room seemed to spark with electricity, it was dangerous, erotic and thick with emotion.

Regina set her jaw and with a challenging look on her face, she accepted Emma's unspoken dare. She stood up and slowly placed her hand in Emma's.

Emma pulled her towards her and when their bodies impacted, Emma kissed her employer violently. Their teeth crashed together first and then their tongue were moving roughly against one another. All Emma's daydreams about Regina's luscious lips were forgotten. It was her turn to be furious now and if Regina wanted sex tonight, that was the type of sex she was getting. Not that the brunette was complaining, in fact she seemed to be just as forceful as Emma.

When Emma felt Regina bite onto her lower lip she moved her face away and began to attack Regina's beautiful neck with rough kisses and bites.

"Miss Swan! I suggest you do not leave marks where it can be seen. I have to be in the shop tomorrow."

"Is that a suggestion or an order," Emma hissed.

Regina gave a deep throaty laugh. "Fine, take what you want. After all, I do have a very nice collection of Hermes scarves that would cover it up nicely."

Emma didn't reply to that she merely latched onto Regina's neck, determined to give her a hickey that would last for weeks.

Regina groaned happily, letting Emma do as she pleased while she busied herself with squeezing Emma's buttocks through her jeans. Emma realised that her rage dissipated for a moment at that. Regina giving in to her will was... intoxicating. This woman was always in control and now she had just let Emma take control and overrule her on something as important as her private nature and her appearance. Emma felt almost high with triumph. She wanted more of that feeling.

She began to manoeuvre Regina to where she wanted her; the desk. She moved away from the brunette and noted that Regina now had a flaming red mark on her neck. She walked over to the desk and briskly pulled it out from the wall. Now there was plenty of room on either side of the slim desk. She swept her arm across the surface of it and a pen holder filled with expensive pens and two notepads went flying across the room.

Regina gave a gasp of incredulity. "What do you think you are doing?"

"Making room for you. Oh... *I honestly thought that you knew this was where we were heading,*" Emma spat out in a bad imitation of Regina.

Regina snarled at her earlier words being thrown back in her face, but there was an eagerness in those chocolate-brown eyes.

"You brute," she purred.

Emma refused to rise to the bait of that purr. "Oh, you haven't seen anything yet, sweetheart. Have a seat."

Regina scoffed. "Why should I?"

"Fine, stay standing," Emma said calmly and stared Regina dead in the eye.

Regina squinted at her guest, obviously evaluating what Emma was planning to do.

Slowly, oh so slowly, she walked over to the desk and sat down on it primly. Once more Emma felt the rush of having Regina do what she told her too.

With her heart beating hard but steady, Emma began to undo her belt. She took her time and made sure to look Regina right in the eye as she slowly pulled the leather belt out of its hoops and over the buckle. She could tell that Regina was barely breathing and those stunning brown eyes had become very big. That sensation of overwhelming lust with a hint of fear was something that Emma enjoyed herself and seeing it in Regina's eyes now just made her all the more aroused.

Regina's gaze dropped from Emma's eyes and fell to where the belt was slowly being taken off. Emma was thrilled that Regina showed every sign of seeing what a symbol of power and dominance a thick leather belt could be.

"You know this belt is going around your wrists, right?" Emma's voice was low with anger and thick with arousal.

Regina licked her lips and swallowed, still staring hungrily at the belt which was off the jeans now and hanging from Emma's outstretched hand.

"Oh really? I was expecting it to be used for something worse."

"Oh, you thought I was going to punish your gorgeous ass with it? Not on a first date, Miss Snobby. You'd have to *earn* that. No, this is just going to keep you immobile while I fuck you. That is why I'm here right? Just to fuck?"

Suddenly there was a look in Regina's eyes that Emma couldn't read. Did she have deeper feelings after all? Regina opened her mouth to speak but then changed her mind and closed her mouth again. She gave a curt nod and pursed her lips in determination.

Emma set her jaw. "Fine. Then that's what we'll do. Stand up again and then bend over the desk."

Release and salted caramel

Chapter Notes

Author's note: This chapter will have some rough sex but it will all be consensual and hopefully not too alarming for those of you not into this sort of thing.

Regina raised an eyebrow in a questioning, cool manner.

Emma glared back at her. "Looking at me like I'm some bug who just crawled into your kitchen isn't going to work, Regina. If you are going to treat me like some sex freak, then I'm going to be one."

Regina smirked and looked haughtily at Emma. "Why shouldn't we both be *sex freaks*, as you call it? We're consenting adults, are we not? The only one here slut-shaming you, seems to be you. Oh, and about the desk... while I'm glad to see your dominant side, don't think I am going to make this easy for you."

"If you want to play this game then follow the rules. You've got me furious and you have made it clear that you don't want any romance so there is no option for vanilla sex here, is there?"

Regina's gave an elegant shrug. "No, I suppose not."

"Right. So if you don't want power play, let me know now and we can say no to sex altogether. I can just call you tomorrow and we can stick to the case from now on. No harm, no foul."

Regina smirked even bigger. "What on earth made you think I would want *vanilla sex*? That fire in your eyes, Miss Swan, that's what I want."

Emma felt herself smile inwardly. She wanted this game so badly now and she was so relieved that Regina did too.

"Fine. Then bend over the desk."

Regina's perfect lips moved into a quick snarl, as if she wanted to fight back to anger Emma more, but she obviously decided against it. She stood up and then bent over the desk. Emma looked at the amazing apple-shaped ass displayed before her and realised that she was breathing very fast, she wasn't half as calm and collected as she let Regina think. But she was still angry and still incredibly aroused and she had to have an outlet for it, thankfully Regina had presented her with one.

With heavy steps, heavy enough so that Regina could hear every single one, Emma walked around the desk and approached the top of Regina's body. She still had the belt in her hand and now she held it out for Regina to see.

"Let your arms hang down, as if you were reaching for the floor."

Regina gave a scoff as to show that she found this all tedious and ridiculous but obeyed quickly.

Emma crouched down and placed the belt around the brunette's wrists and tightened it until the wrists were squeezed together. Emma took a grip of Regina's long hair and gently pulled until Regina lifted her head, then she kissed her. She kissed her breath away, trying to put all of her emotion into the kiss.

When it was over she stood up without a word and circled the desk until she was back at Regina's ass. She caressed the soft, left buttock and then gave it a hard slap, knowing full well that the dress and underwear would shield Regina's beautiful olive skin from the brunt of the pain.

Still, it made Regina flinch and moan seductively and Emma felt that rush again. Her adrenaline was pumping hard and her blood was echoing it. She wanted this woman more than she could say. And more than that, she wanted this woman's submission.

In one ferocious move she yanked Regina's dress up and then, equally brusquely, she pulled her panties down. In a matter of seconds Regina was exposed to the cool air of the room and to the woman she had employed. Regina had gasped in pleasure when the dress was pushed over her full cheeks and again when the panties were dragged down her thighs but now she was silent.

Emma used her feet to push Regina's feet, still clad in her high heels, apart as wide as they could go. When she had finished that, Emma looked at the sex that she was about to toy with. It was beautiful.

Regina was shaved but for a patch of pitch black curls on her mons pubis. She could see that she was wet, Regina's labia gleamed slightly in the lamplight and if Emma concentrated really hard, she could smell a faint, spicy scent coming from the wetness. Emma knew very well that she was just as wet, if not more, and currently spoiling her red panties and soon probably her tight jeans too.

She couldn't help herself, she reached out a finger and dragged it through the soaked slit. When it was covered in warm juices she brought it up to her mouth and tasted it. Regina tasted rich, heady, a little spicy and utterly delicious. With irritation Emma realised that this was probably the best tasting pussy she had ever come across. *Figures. Perfect god damn bitch*, Emma's mind grumbled enviously.

Her fury was reignited and without warning she slid her index finger into Regina's entrance. Regina's gasp was so loud that it was almost a yelp. That was no surprise to Emma, what did catch her off guard was Regina moaning, "oh yes, just like that" in a desperate tone right afterwards.

It made Emma feel that tell-tale pull in her lower abdomen which showed that she was about to be mind-blowingly horny. Her heart was

racing so fast now that she worried about passing out. She forced herself to take a few deep breaths and just enjoy the sensation of Regina's soft, drenched passage throbbing around her finger.

When she was calmer, she pulled the finger out and once more tasted the wetness. She must have made a slurping sound because Regina's voice, all deep and suggestive, came from other side of the desk. "Enjoying that, Miss Swan? Perhaps a better dessert than the crème brûlée, hmm?"

Emma grimaced at a woman who could be hanging over a desk with her wrists bound and no say in how she was fucked and still be so infuriatingly smug!

Instinctively she growled, a sound coming from deep in her throat, and then she pushed two fingers into Regina with full force. This time the sound coming from Regina was neither a gasp nor a yelp, it was a scream. A scream soon followed by a needy moan. That was all Emma needed to hear, she busied herself with fucking her fingers into Regina as fast and as hard as she could.

"Was... this... what ... you... wanted," Emma panted with vehemence.

"Yes. Yes, Emma. Just so," Regina replied between moans. She could feel her eyes rolling back into her head and her hips moving in time with the thrusts, not to lessen them but to increase them and get more impact.

This. This was what she had always wanted but never dared to ask for, danger so neatly packaged in underlying respect that it stopped being alarming. That and this slight sting of pain that blurred with pleasure until it made her entire body hum with sensations. She didn't truly know this woman and there was something freeing in that. Regina Mills was not the sort of woman to be fucked by a stranger and yet... now she sort of was.

She trusted Emma but deep down she knew that she had no other reason for that then her instinct and the interactions during a week or so of acquaintance. This was mad. Mad and wonderful. Like a glass full of brandy burning in your stomach. Regina didn't put much stock into

feeling wild and letting go of control, she never had. But this was just the right amount of madness. Emma Swan was just the right amount of reckless abandon.

She stopped analysing it and just enjoyed the fingers working inside her and the little grunts of effort that the beautiful blonde gave. Time didn't seem to move. All that happened was that Regina pleasure grew with each thrust against the spot that separated her passage and the internal parts of her clitoris. Her pussy seemed to be working together with Emma, as if it had been waiting for her.

The belt around her wrists was strange. It was degrading and clearly made her more helpless, and yet... it made her feel like she had nothing to be ashamed of. It wasn't her that so badly wanted to be bent over the desk and nearly violated with mad, wonderful shagging. The choice wasn't hers, because she was tied up, and so the shame wasn't hers either. She was freed from the imprisoning restrictions placed on her by first her mother and then by herself.

The belt cut into her wrists and her pussy ached and throbbed with the pain of the pounding as well as with the need to come. She loved it. Why had she never done this before? She felt a sudden rush of affection for Emma. The blonde just did what they both wanted and needed so simply, so easily, so... perfectly.

It was a shame that Emma was angry at her. But then people always ended up angry at her, well unless they were Mary who was never really angry at anyone.

At least she had established that this was only to be physical and that would keep her safe. No heartbreak when Emma saw more of her horrible personality and no heartbreak when Emma's vagabond ways kicked in and the amazing woman left London again. No, she was safe. This purely-sex-and-work relationship was safe. Safe and so damn good. She let herself moan, not censoring the volume and type of noises as she usually did.

Those incessant fingers kept taking what they wanted and they kept rubbing at that spot on her internal wall as they did. She was gradually being pushed up on the desk by the pounding of Emma's fingers and she could feel her feet lifting from the ground, dangling helplessly a couple of inches off the floor. Her heels were close to sliding off her feet from the motion of it and she didn't care.

And now Regina could feel sparks... sparks shooting through her nervous system, telling her that orgasm was near. She gave into it, didn't analyse if it was too soon like she normally did, she just let it happen.

She screamed out her climax in a way which was not just unladylike but which probably would make the neighbours call the police. For the first time in her life she didn't care. The orgasm was all-encompassing and it took over everything she was and it didn't seem to want to end. She couldn't tell how long it lasted but it was long enough for her voice to give out and the scream to die in her throat. Colours danced in front of her eyes and her toes curled in her shoes. She came with every fibre of her being and felt total release engulfing her.

When it finally ended she fell over the desk like a ragdoll. She could feel Emma bend over her as she extracted her fingers and pant, "you feel so fucking good." Then Emma nuzzled her dark hair away from her neck with her nose and licked the sweat off the nape of her neck.

"Even your skin tastes good. You taste like freakin' salted caramel."

Regina smiled with her face flat against her desk and forced her mouth shut. She knew that if she opened it, she would say something she regretted. Something about how wonderful Emma was or how enamoured she was with her.

They stayed like that for a while, both getting their strength back. Regina wondered if Emma was still angry and as she felt her breath and her faculties return she decided to try to make it up to her.

"You have tasted me. It's only fair that I get to taste you now."

Emma scoffed. "Is that your way of telling me you want to go down on me?"

"Putting it crudely, yes." Regina bit her lip to keep from rescinding the offer out of pride.

"Ask nicely."

"Excuse me?"

Emma's tone was rough. "You heard me, ask me if you're allowed to eat my pussy."

Still angry then. Well, it's for the best, her being angry is better than us both being heartbroken, Regina thought and prepared herself to use language she wasn't comfortable with, but that she secretly had always wanted to use.

"May I please... lick your pussy," Regina said and was glad that Emma couldn't see the blush creeping into her face.

"I didn't say the word *lick*."

Regina pursed her lips. "Miss Swan. Are you really going to argue that point right now? Do you wish to come or not?"

"Do it right or don't do it at all," Emma snarled in response to Regina's superior tone of voice.

Regina rolled her eyes to hide how fast and happily her heart was beating. "Fine. May I please... eat your pussy?"

"Yeah, sure. Unless you decide it's too common and *incompatible personality wise*."

Regina wondered how often she was going to have her words thrown back into her face tonight.

Emma moved off her and as Regina struggled to get her feet back on the ground she could hear Emma pull the zip of her jeans down.

"A little help here, maybe?"

As a reply, Emma grunted "hang on" in annoyance and then helped Regina onto her feet.

Regina looked down at her dress which was bunched up at her waist and her panties which were halfway down her thighs and then there was the belt around her wrists.

"And the rest?" She enquired.

"Oh no, you are going to keep looking like a sexy slut while you eat me. You're gonna look just like that, mascara slightly runny, skin shiny with sweat, clothes in a mess to show off your newly fucked cunt and that look of defiance in your eyes. Now... make the picture complete... get on your knees."

Regina felt confused at the fact that she wasn't furious at that remark. No one else would be allowed to degrade her like this and yet, she couldn't feel angry right now. She just felt... like she was playing a game. A game where they both knew the rules and both knew that what happened in that room, stayed there. Their dirty, exquisite, little secret.

Emma walked over to the sofa and got a cushion. She threw it carelessly on the floor in front of Regina and resumed staring challengingly into her employer's eyes.

Regina hesitated for a brief moment and then she gingerly got down on her knees. It wasn't an easy task with her wrists bound and her heels still on but after a while she had managed it without toppling over or hurting her knees. She steadied herself on the cushion and then looked up at Emma. For a second she worried about what Emma had said, that her makeup was ruined. Did she look horrible? But Emma's eyes showed neither disgust nor malice. They showed only desire and Regina felt secure again.

The blonde pulled down her unzipped jeans and took them off, throwing them carelessly to the side. She walked over to Regina.

"Kiss my pussy."

Regina didn't argue this time, she kissed the warm sex through the red panties while wondering if the private detective always wore that striking colour of underwear.

"Red? Bold colour," she said when she had kissed the covered pussy reverently.

Emma shrugged. "Red underwear is sort of my thing. I have lots of red panties and bra's. Now, tug the fabric down with your teeth."

Regina had never done that before but she soon got a good grip on the elastics of the panties and pulled them down as far as she could without losing her balance and falling onto Emma's legs.

"Thank you," Emma said and stepped back to pull them the rest of the way and then off. She threw them in the general direction of her jeans without taking her eyes off Regina.

She walked forward again and Regina was stunned to realise that this was the first time she had seen someone be sexy while wearing all their clothes on the top half but only a pair of grey socks with the Wonder woman symbol on the bottom half. Somehow, Emma Swan pulled it off. And now she was pulling at Regina's hair. She had a firm grip on a handful of tresses and was inclining Regina's head up to face her.

"You still want to eat my pussy?"

"So very much," Regina croaked and knew that she meant it.

"Then go ahead, bury your face in there and don't come up for air until I come on your tongue."

The words made Regina throb with arousal again and she had to fight her wish to moan as her mouth neared its goal.

Emma wasn't shaved like she was, but her dark blonde curls were heavily trimmed and wouldn't be in the way, instead they merely tickled Regina's cheeks as she got close enough to feel Emma's heat and wetness on her lips.

It was a difficult position to be able to reach all of Emma's pussy in, but Regina relished licking the bits she could reach, which was mainly the clit and the top of the tight hole. Emma tasted sharp but nice and Regina let the taste fill her mouth.

There was a lot of liquid pooled between the petite pussy-lips and it soon coated most of her lower face. She closed her eyes and let her tongue find a steady rhythm of circling on Emma's clit. It was big and erect and Regina felt a rush of pride at making Emma so aroused.

The fact that Emma was so turned on meant that she was soon moaning at full volume and pushing her pussy forwards, almost suffocating Regina at times. She wasn't about to protest though. The uninhibited and delicious sounds Emma was making felt like the most wonderful of compliments and egged Regina on. She increased the pace of licking so much that she could feel a strain in her tongue, she dealt with it by keeping the tongue still and moving her head instead. She pushed her face in and out of the wet cunt and let her tongue flatly push against Emma's hard clit.

Emma had kept her hand in Regina's hair but not pulled on it. Now she began to firm her grip though and her fingers soon buried themselves in the thick mane of dark hair. Soon she was holding on to Regina's head with both hands and pushing it in further every time it was buried in the drenched treasure trove.

Emma was whimpering in a high pitch now and her knees seemed to be buckling. Regina wanted to hold her hips up to steady her but she was helpless with her wrists tied in front of her. Luckily, Emma kept upright until her orgasm hit. As it slowly took over part after part of her body, Emma became less balanced and as the last thrust of it hit her she fell to her knees on the sofa cushion. One of her knees almost knocked Regina's

to the side, which would have sent them both toppling to the floor but together they managed to both stay on the cushion and somewhat upright.

Emma buried her face in the crook of Regina's neck and took deep, gasping breaths there. Regina could feel the hot air of Emma's breaths and shivered under the pleasure of it. Soon the breaths became slower and Emma came up from her hiding place. Wordlessly she kissed Regina's wet mouth and then began to undo the belt around Regina's wrists. She threw it over by her jeans and ran her fingers through her blonde, tousled tresses.

"Do you, um, want to do it again? I mean, that's the joy of being queer women, right... lots of orgasms."

Regina chuckled as she rubbed her sore wrists. "Yes, well, I think we have both had a tiring evening and we should probably put an end to the games now before someone gets hurt. Next time I promise you more climaxes and a chance to actually eat the dessert I made for you. Unless you would like it before you go?"

Emma stood up on unsteady legs. She put her panties back on and then her jeans and belt while she replied, "no thanks, I'm not really in the mood. As you say... it's been an eventful night."

"Of course. I will see you out then."

Emma put on her wrinkled blazer and high heeled boots in silence under Regina's watchful gaze. When she was done she wondered if she should kiss Regina or just leave. No, this was supposed to be just about sex. No tender goodnight kisses, then. She settled for a smile and saw it echoed on her lover's face.

"Right. Sleep tight and call me tomorrow if you manage to wave that customer on the bike down and get the name of her boyfriend."

"Yes, of course. And do get in touch with me if you have anything further to discuss regarding the case," Regina replied with a look that seemed almost shy all of a sudden.

"Sure. G'night."

"Goodnight, Emma."

As she walked down the stairs Emma sighed deeply. It wasn't until that point she realised how much she had wanted Regina to be interested in her. Oh well, apparently it was only physical, she would have to settle for that.

Well, that and solving the mystery of these damn books and who was after them.

Monday

The foggy Monday morning found Regina re-arranging the window display to include some of her new acquisitions. She hoped that Carlos Ruiz Zafon and Terry Pratchett would get on well with Dickens, Austen, Twain and Tolstoy.

As she moved the books around she took care to let the sleeves of her shirt cover her wrists completely. The marks from the belt were very faint by now but she didn't want anyone to catch a glimpse of them. Not necessarily because they would judge her but because those marks were special. Together with the mark on her neck and the soreness between her legs they promised her that last night hadn't been a dream. Emma had made those marks and she had given Regina a taste of something extraordinary.

Ever since Regina had woken up she had been thinking about her new lover. Should she text her? Maybe even call her? But she always stopped as she realised that she still didn't have a clue what she would say. They had set the boundaries for their relationship, or rather, she had set the boundaries and she couldn't break them now. She had to protect their hearts. However, that was all she wanted to protect. She wanted the rest of her to be at Emma's mercy and perhaps even enjoy some role reversal.

Unless Emma was still angry or perhaps hurt from the rejection? She had been quite cruel and crass with the American. She could perhaps text Emma under the pretence of talking about the case? Then she could make sure Emma was okay. But what would she say about the case, she had no news or pertinent queries. *Back to square one*, she thought and tried to put those thoughts out of her mind.

She straightened out the last volume in the display of selected books presented prettily in vintage shipping crates and sighed. She had so

hoped that this wouldn't become complicated, and yet she seemed to once more have gotten herself stuck in the quicksand of mixed emotions. Emma was... intoxicating. And that meant that she had to be careful.

Emma was eating a bunch of buttermilk pancakes and drowning them in maple syrup, but she wasn't comfort eating. In fact, she was feeling surprisingly chipper. If there was one thing Emma Swan was, it was adaptable. Last night she had been disappointed that Regina only wanted her body but this morning she had turned that into gratitude for that Regina *did want her body*. And that she wanted it so damn much that she had let go of all control last night.

Emma could foresee many nights of amazing sex with this woman and maybe that would be enough? It would sure as hell be fun anyway. So now she was making up for the dessert she had missed yesterday by stuffing her face with good old American pancakes for breakfast.

"Damn Em, you're going through pancakes faster than we can make them," Ruby said with a laugh and poured Emma a mug of coffee.

"Sorry, it's just that I'm used to thinking about how much I can eat to stretch my money through the month and well, getting free food here in exchange for cleaning up or doing the dishes once in a while... well, it leads to me piling up the delicious carbs."

"Well we have plenty of pancake batter and syrup so we don't mind, but not to be rude here, but don't you worry about your weight? I have to stick to meat and veg and here's you eating your body weight in pancakes!"

Emma shrugged. "I care enough to add another twenty minutes to my daily run but that's about it. As long as I keep exercising, my metabolism takes care of whatever I stuff my face with. Which reminds me, are you going running with me today?"

Ruby sat down on the opposite side of the booth Emma was occupying. "Yeah, sure. If I can take a break when it's quiet I'll come along."

"We can do it on your lunch hour?"

"It's a deal! I'm surprised though."

Emma knitted her brows. "About what?"

"Well, I thought you had gotten enough exercise for a while. I mean, considering how late you stumbled in last night and the way you have been grinning ever since... I assumed that your date with Regina went *very well*," Ruby said with a suggestive grin.

"I don't kiss and tell but since it's you I'll agree to as much as that I got a little extra exercise yesterday. Oh, and that's how it's gonna stay with Regina. No romance, just... exercise. Let's leave it at that."

"What? No details? God, what's the point of having a lesbian Casanova for a friend if I don't get the details?"

Emma glared at her while chewing a mouthful of pancakes.

Ruby waved her hand dismissively. "Anyway, I'm glad the two of you figured out what this thing between you is. Although, you know as well as I do that friends with benefits often turns into romance."

Emma swallowed down a big lump of pancakes. "If it does, I'll go with the flow. If it doesn't, I'll just enjoy what I'm getting."

Ruby got up and walked back to the counter, replying over her shoulder. "Fine, just be careful. You might be flexible but you're not immune to a broken heart and I dread to think how many pancakes you'd go through if you were really sad."

While Monday morning found Emma and Regina on the same street, it found Robin Locksley standing in a dim corner of the Barbican. He had been waiting for far too long in the November cold and he was beginning to shiver.

Suddenly, a polite cough came from behind him and Constable Locksley began to turn around to see who was there.

"Stay where you are, Constable. It's best for both of us if you do not see my face."

The constant furrows on Robin's forehead grew deeper. "Fine. Just tell me what you want from me."

"That is easy enough. I and my associates simply want what my note requested – the book series by the name of *This unkindness of ravens*. We know you haven't informed any of your colleagues or superiors about it, luckily for you, so all you have to do is hand them over and then we can all get on with our day in peace."

Robin groaned and rubbed his face with his hand. "I knew I should have turned them in as evidence. I just wanted to solve this quickly and easily for... her. Putting them through the system would take ages, the science guys x-raying it and the code experts staring at it while they decide what they want for lunch – it all takes so long. I wanted to try and solve it faster."

"A big risk to take for this *Miss Mills*. Is she really attractive enough to risk your career for?"

"It wasn't because she's pretty! It was because I looked into her eyes and I saw someone lonely and hurt. Someone who had been forced to fend for herself for far too long. I just... wanted to help her."

"You wanted to be her hero," Christopher Steel summed up in an impassive tone.

"Yes. Is that such a bad thing?"

"In my personal experience it is inadvisable to try and rescue people, but that doesn't really matter now. Where are the books?"

"I don't have them with me. They're in my house."

"Alright. Then we meet here again tomorrow and then you *will* bring me the books," Steel said without a hint of impatience.

Robin's voice got a distinct tone of fear. "How will I know that you won't hurt Marian if I do give them to you? And why shouldn't I just report this to my boss?"

"You don't, but you can be certain that we *will* hurt her if you don't hand the books over. Oh, and I wouldn't report this to anyone simply because it would not only end your career but obviously also end your wife's life."

Robin squeezed his eyes shut. "Alright. I'll bring the books."

That evening, Regina had stayed behind after the shop was closed for business. She had spent her time reading the latest Siri Hustvedt novel and drinking way too much coffee, something her stomach acid would probably punish her for throughout the night.

When it was twenty minutes past seven, Regina put her coat on and stood outside the shop to wait for Isabelle. She kept adjusting the Hermes scarf that was covering up her bright red love bite. The evening air was cold enough for her breath to fog up and she was relieved when Isabelle, or Belle as she should start to think of her as, arrived a few minutes early.

Regina waved her arms at the woman on the bike and called her name. With a frown of confusion Belle stopped and got off her bicycle.

"Regina? Hello there. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, everything is fine. I apologize for stopping you on your way home, but I need your help with something. Do you have time to step into the shop so I can explain? There should still be some hot coffee if you'd like?"

"Sure, I'll come in. I don't drink coffee though, especially not on an empty stomach."

"Oh, of course, you haven't eaten either. I... don't suppose you'd let me buy you some greasy American diner food while I ask you for this favour?"

Belle's face lit up. "If this place has burgers, I'm in!"

"Alright, let me just lock up and we'll head over to the diner over there."

Regina quickly picked up her mobile and texted Emma while she turned off all the lights.

I and the regular I spoke of, Belle, will be eating in Granny's diner in a few minutes. Feel free to join us if you have time. R.

Then she locked up the shop and turned to Belle. "Right, let's go and try those burgers out. Or if I'm really lucky, they might be able to locate some form of salad for me. If not I'll just ask them to scrape the lettuce off all the burgers."

Belle laughed and led her bike as she walked with Regina to the diner with its misted up windows and its flickering sign.

Dinner at the diner

There had been a salad on the menu after all, a Salade niçoise to be exact, and Regina was now happily tucking into it. She hadn't realised how hungry she was until the first piece of tuna hit her tongue.

Belle was equally happy with her burger and kept saying how nutty the beef tasted and how she liked the sesame bun. The praise had made Eugenia Lucas take a shine to the librarian right away and she give her a free refill on her diet coke.

Regina took a sip of her mineral water and then froze as she heard a familiar voice say, "hey Regina" behind her.

Regina felt the little hairs stand up on her arms at the sound of that voice and for a second she even imagined she could feel the marks on her body, and the soreness between her legs, tingle in response to their maker. She wanted to smile. She wanted to kiss Emma. She scolded herself for being an idiot and gathered her wits before turning to greet her private investigator.

"Good evening, Miss Swan. May I introduce Isabelle... Ah, I'm terribly sorry, I don't know your surname," Regina said as she turned back to Belle.

"Oh, don't worry. I don't think I ever told you. It doesn't really come up when you are just discussing books and authors." Belle stood up and held her hand out to Emma.

"Hello, I'm Isabelle French, but you can call me Belle."

Emma shook her hand. "Nice to meet you, I'm Emma Swan and you can call me 'Ms Mills' favourite pain in the ass.' Or just Emma."

Belle laughed and Regina gave a wry chuckle before wiping at the corners of her red-tinted lips with a napkin.

"I'm afraid that is quite true. However, Emma is also a very industrious and driven private detective who is helping me solve a mystery, so I asked her to join us while I asked you for that favour I require. Is that alright?"

The librarian nodded. "Sure! The more the merrier. Now tell me, I'm dying of curiosity here."

Regina and Belle were sitting in a booth, the same one which Emma had enjoyed her pancakes in earlier that morning. If Emma was going to sit down, she had to pick if she wanted to sit down next to Belle or to Regina. While the librarian seemed nice and Emma had always been weak for Australian girls, there was no real choice here. Emma sat down next to Regina and tried to calculate how close she was allowed to sit.

Did their new physical relationship mean that Emma could dare be a little more stealthily touchy-feely or were they supposed to be completely cold with each other until the clothes came off?

Suddenly Emma felt like when she was 16 and about to put her arm around her first crush. What was acceptable and what was off limits? She was almost sweating and all she was doing was sitting next to someone. Luckily Regina's tense frame showed that she wasn't comfortable either. Emma sat down next to Regina without touching her and yet... the proximity of her employer almost brought her out in goosebumps. It was so strange to feel so shy and so unsure with someone you had been having rough sex with just last night. Emma had never experienced anything like this.

Regina fidgeted a little in her seat and looked annoyed by her own gesture. "Well, I won't tell you everything as it might have an element of danger involved. Don't worry though, the police have been contacted to deal with that. But basically, we have some questions about a set of strange books and the man who wrote, published and printed them. You

mentioned your boyfriend's special interest, do you think he would be willing to allow us to pick his brain about this issue?"

"Rupert mind talking about weird books? That'll never happen. He'd love to discuss them, I'm sure," Belle said with a smile.

"His name is *Rupert*", Emma asked incredulously and felt Regina hit her foot with her heel under the table.

Belle didn't seem to take offense though. "Yes, Rupert Gold. He's not very happy about the name either but I think he pulls it off. He sort of has this gravitas and power about him. Oh and really cute hair."

Both Emma and Regina simply gave polite smiles at the love-struck Australian.

"I'm glad you think he'd like to speak with us," Regina said. "Would he prefer to come to the shop or should we all meet for a meal some time?"

Emma snuck a glance at Regina and felt her heart beat double time when she realised that Regina was toying with her scarf. That scarf which hid the evidence of last night. God, Regina's skin had tasted so damn good.

"Actually, why don't you come by his shop? If he has any books that mention this author of yours or his works, it'll be in his shop. And he really likes to show off his collection, especially to other book-nerds. No offence," Belle said with a grinning nod to Regina.

Regina smiled back. "I don't know what you mean, dear. Book-nerd is a compliment! Right, when should we pay your Rupert a visit then?"

How easily the word 'we' slid off her tongue when she spoke about herself and Emma, a little too easily for comfort.

Belle swallowed down a bite of her burger. "These days he closes up the shop at seven; same time as the library closes, he's sweet like that. So I could meet you there and do the introductions sometime between 7.15 and 7.30?"

"That sounds good to me. Emma?"

Emma had to fight to keep herself from smiling when Regina said her name. "Sure, what's the address?"

"Hang on, I have one of his business cards here somewhere." Belle rummaged through her rucksack and both Emma and Regina caught glimpses of books and a bicycle helmet shoved on top of them. Finally Belle opened a small compartment at the front and found a rumpled piece of card. It reminded Emma of that mysterious card that Regina had in her pocket on Sunday.

"There you go," Belle said and handed Regina the business card. It was on cream paper and the text was embossed in gold. It read:

Rupert Gold

Connoisseur and collector of curios, antiques and rare books.

Underneath that was a phone number and an address in Camden.

Regina placed it in her pocket and brought up a business card of her own to hand to Belle. "We'll meet you there tomorrow then. If you find out that he is otherwise engaged tomorrow night or simply not inclined to talk to us, call me on the mobile number on the card there."

"Will do," Belle said and stuck the card into the rucksack. Then she returned to eating her hamburger.

"That looks good," Emma said enviously.

Regina looked at her. "Have you not had dinner either, dear?"

"Actually I have. I had some deep fried chicken about an hour ago, but I exercised a lot today and... some last night too, so I keep feeling starving today. It's weird."

Regina gave Emma a look and the blonde wondered if she had pushed her luck, but then Regina just smirked.

"Well, I won't have it said that I don't keep my employees fed and happy. May I order you a dessert?"

Emma's goosebumps came back right away. That was flirting, no doubt about it.

"If you're offering, I'll always eat it. That's a given."

Regina's smirk vanished and she looked stern for a second. Emma didn't wince though, she just looked smug at how she had taken the sneaky flirting another step towards the line of what they could say in public. She had a feeling that annoying Regina was about to be her new hobby.

"Right. Excuse me while I go order. It seems to be faster to order at the counter than wait for service here. What would you like, Miss Swan?"

Emma gave a low, soft little chuckle. "I don't even know where to start."

"Start at the top of your wish list... and then you can work your way down," Regina replied without being able to keep a bit of a flirtatious tone out of her voice.

"You know what? Surprise me. I bet you know what I'll like," Emma said and stood up to let Regina out of the booth.

As Regina walked past, Emma let her hip move forward to graze Regina's rear, daring to make that much contact at least. Regina pretended to ignore it but Emma could see the brunette's hands ball into fists to keep control.

Emma sat back down and Belle smiled kindly at her.

"So, Emma, how did you and Regina meet?"

"She saw my ad in the window over there and hired me to help her with this case."

"Oh, I see," Belle replied with a hint of surprise.

Emma peered at her. "Why? How did you think we met?"

"Hmm, I don't know. I just thought you knew each other better than that. You seem quite... close, somehow."

Emma sucked her teeth while she considered her next words. "Well, I think she and I get along quite well and I think we make a pretty good investigating team."

"Please don't think me rude here, but I bet you'd make a good team in general," Belle said and gave Emma a meaning look.

Emma laughed. "I'm afraid she shot that idea down pretty quick. I don't live up to her expectations of a partner, I'm afraid."

Belle frowned. "That's a shame. You'd make an adorable couple."

"Thanks," Emma said with a grin. "Everyone loves blonde and brunette couples, huh?"

Belle laughed and looked up to see Regina walking over with a small plate.

She placed it in front of Emma. "Cherry pie with vanilla ice-cream. It seems they don't serve dishes like *crème brûlée* here."

Emma's grin grew wide and Regina couldn't help return it, albeit much more discreetly.

"Wow, thank you so much. You'll have to redact it from my pay."

"Oh, no need for that, I'm sure that in time you will earn your keep, or *earn your pie* in this case."

Emma smirked a little. "I'll make sure I do, boss."

Belle giggled. "I'll leave you two to discuss payments. I better get home and check in with my cat. She tears the house apart if I'm away for too long. Thanks for dinner, Regina. It was nice meeting you, Emma."

"Likewise! Have a great night and we'll see you tomorrow," Emma said with her most charming smile.

Belle stared for a second, momentarily distracted by the immensely pretty smile. Then she returned the smile and waved them goodbye.

"Please tell me that you did not just hit on the poor woman," Regina muttered.

"No. Just making sure she likes me, that's always helpful in a case. But if I was... would you be jealous?" Emma sat down and calmly began eating her cherry pie.

"Of course not, Miss Swan. I am not your girlfriend. You can shag half of London if you wish," Regina replied tersely. Too tersely.

"Nah, I go for quality not quantity. I'd rather find one woman that I *really* want to seduce than sleep with a dozen women I barely remember afterwards. Sex is better when there is a natural progression of knowing each other and what the other one gets off on. I just don't get much of a chance to do that as I don't stay very long in one place," Emma replied before she continued wolfing down the pie.

Regina swallowed down a sip of her mineral water, then put the glass down and turned to face the woman next to her. In her most suggestive voice she asked, "and what about right now?"

Emma gulped down her mouthful of pie quickly to be able to reply. "Do you mean if I've found that one woman I want to keep having sex with or if I'm staying put for a while?"

Regina gave an elegant shrug. She deliberately began to play with her scarf while maintaining the eye contact. "Both, I suppose."

Emma grinned. "Yes."

"Which question was that in reply to?"

"Both, I suppose," Emma said in an echo of Regina's words.

They smiled at each other and both returned to eating. Regina finished what was left of her salad before Emma finished her pie, which meant that Regina had a while to watch Emma eat. She found herself enjoying the view. Emma took big bites and ate voraciously. Normally Regina would have thought that uncouth, she certainly had when she had been a boyfriend who ate that way, but now; with Emma, it was just sexy.

Regina squared her shoulders. She was going to have to ask the question as Emma was clearly too busy with her pie and too unfazed about the rules of their new arrangement to bother asking.

She steeled herself and asked. "I feel the need to ask you about your expectations of... our situation."

Emma caught a crumb of piecrust from her lip and licked it off her thumb. "What do you mean?"

Regina pursed her lips impatiently. "I mean that we entered a purely physical relationship last night and I would like to set the boundaries of it to avoid any future confusion or discomfort."

Emma stopped eating for a second and sat back in the booth. "I assume, and stop me if I'm wrong, that we are all business in front of others. Although I think we can sneak-flirt a little, like we did when Belle was here. And then, when we feel like it – we ask the other one if they want a roll in the hay. We clearly piss each other off; and sometimes that can, weirdly, be a turn on. So we can vent our annoyance by... you know... screwing like bunnies."

Regina shook her head a little. "Gosh, you don't mince your words OR beat around the bush, do you?"

Emma shrugged. "Who has time for that crap?"

Regina raised an eyebrow at the profanity but didn't mention it. "Well, I approve of your analysis. We are adult women who can keep our sex lives separate from our business arrangements. Although, I wish to put

in a caveat to your idea of 'sneak-flirting': we have to be more discreet than we were just now. God knows what Belle thought."

Emma gave a chuckle. "She thought we were adorable. She said so when you went to get me pie."

Regina's lips became surprisingly thin and pale as she pressed them together.

"Relax, relax. I told her that you were out of my league," Emma said and returned to eat her pie before the ice cream melted completely.

"For the record, I am *not* out of your league. I don't want you to think my decision not to enter a romantic relationship with you has anything to do with your bank statements or your cultural preferences. We are just not compatible personality wise, that's all."

Emma shrugged. "It amounts to the same result, right? I get the booty but not the cuddles. I can live with that."

Regina scoffed and finished her mineral water. Emma took the last bite of her pie and patted her stomach.

"That hit the spot, thanks again. Are you gonna be heading home? I guess you've important stuff to do... Listen to a symphony, solve the Times crossword or write a sonnet or something. Me, I'm gonna be upstairs. On my soft, comfy bed. Staring at the ceiling and wondering what to do with myself."

Emma leant closer to whisper in Regina's ear, taking pleasure at how Regina gave a shiver when her hot breath hit her ear. "Thanks for the cherry pie. It was delicious but nowhere near as delicious as you." Emma began to get up.

Regina grabbed her wrist and spoke fast in low tones. "If that was meant to make me follow you upstairs and into your bed, it was a feeble try. I'm not tempted, simply because people would see me walking up there and because we would have to keep the noise level down. Now, if you

were to accompany me home to... solve the Times crossword... that would be a much better idea, don't you think?"

Emma smiled from ear to ear. She was getting lucky tonight and this time she was gonna advance to that fancy bed of Regina's.

She replied in the same discreet volume as Regina had used. "Sounds like someone is planning on being loud then. I'm liking this plan. When are we going?"

"Let me pay for the food and then we'll get on the tube."

Emma stood aside with a chivalrous bow to let Regina walk up to the counter.

Two little, dusty, old London shops.

Emma woke up in her own bed. Staying the night at Regina's had been a little too intimate and Emma had been chucked out after two hours of sex with pauses for rehydrating and panting banter. Nothing too intimate. Well, not on the banter front anyway, the sex had been plenty intimate. Less rough than the first time but Regina had let Emma take control once more. It was fun and the kick of having this impressive woman do what she wanted was still a real endorphin rush. In fact, it was even more of a rush now that Emma was no longer angry and confused.

This time they had been on equal footing and everything had run smoothly. She had even made Regina laugh when she had tried to pry about the mysterious Sunday ritual. It was right after they had 69:ed and finally both finished, Emma had always been slow to come in that position – she just wasn't good at multitasking. When she did manage to get that elusive orgasm she let it rush through her and then moved off Regina and turned herself around until her head was next to Regina's on the pillow.

She had turned to kiss Regina's shoulder with come-stained lips and then breathlessly begun to ask questions. Sure, she hadn't been all that stealthy but still... it was annoying how quickly Regina figured out where the vague questions about Regina's hobbies and friends around town was going.

Regina giggled. She actually giggled. It sounded deeper and more dignified than normal giggling but still... it had been a giggle.

"Miss Swan, don't think for a moment that all this mind-blowing sex means that I am going to tell you all my secrets, especially not the one concerning my Sunday ritual. Your little stalking-stunt means you are highly unlikely to ever find out about that."

Emma gave a whining groan. "Oh come on. I'm just curious. What could possibly be so bad? Well, unless it's illegal?"

Regina scoffed. "Hardly."

"Then tell me. I promise to never tell a soul, not even Mary."

"No. It's... just a silly habit I picked up. One that is... not compatible with the level of dignity I try to maintain."

"Okay, now I'm really curious. I bet I'm gonna like this. Hell, I bet I'm gonna like *you* more now. What do you do? Hang around with street thugs? Smoke pot with penniless artists? Go see Disney movies?"

That perfectly shaped eyebrow of Regina's quirked up. "Yes, all of the above. Every Sunday I go watch Snow White with common thugs and destitute artists while smoking marijuana."

"Count me in for next Sunday!"

"Oh do be quiet, Emma."

Emma opened her mouth to speak but realised that she didn't know what to say. Regina saying her first name seemed to have that effect on her. Regina didn't seem to notice though. She was too busy putting her finger on Emma's lips and slowly caressed them as if tracing their shape. Then they kissed and it didn't take long until they somehow glided effortlessly into having sex again, as if they had never stopped.

It had been a great night actually. But now it was morning and while Emma had the warm glow of a night spent having great sex and light-hearted conversation, she still felt tired. She needed coffee.

In fact, she'd have a quick shower and bring some coffee to go over to Regina's shop. It wasn't flirting. No, of course not. It was pure business. The damn raven-books needed to be figured out, and while the threat of those mystery people who wanted the books seemed to have been

eliminated; Emma still worried about Regina's safety. She wanted to keep an eye on her employer. That was all.

While Emma showered and tried to keep from daydreaming about last night, Regina was opening up the bookshop. She was just setting up the till for the day when she realised that she was smiling. That never happened in the morning. But yes, she was smiling. She attributed it to having her physical needs seen to and a nice change of pace. The mystery of the books, while disconcerting, was a bit thrilling if she was honest. And so was Emma Swan. Thrilling and fun.

Regina had woken up with memories of Emma's pout when she had told her that it was time to go home. She had nearly caved then and let the blonde stay the night. How ridiculous was that? She cleared her mind and got on with her morning. There were plenty of things to do and her recalling of the details from last night were counterproductive.

Half an hour later the little bell above the door jingled and Regina looked up to greet the day's first customer. However, this was not a customer. This was a beautiful blonde with reddened cheeks from the cold and takeaway mugs in her gloved hands. It had been a surprisingly cold morning.

"Hey boss. Thought you might want some extra coffee. Unless you already had your second morning cup?"

Regina smiled wider than she should. "No actually, I haven't. I became preoccupied and completely forgot."

This was a lie. She had made herself her second cup the moment she got into the shop's backroom this morning and it had been a big mug, but the adorable woman in front of her didn't need to know that. After all, what was a little extra caffeine rush between friends? She could have a third morning cup.

"Good. I got Eugenia to make yours extra strong. She says hi by the way."

Regina accepted the hot mug. The coffee was jet black and Regina had no difficulty in believing that it was extra strong. It looked like that caffeine rush might not be so *little*.

"Thank you, send my regards back to her when you see her."

Emma took a sip of her own milky coffee. "I will. So, I just wanted to drop by and make sure you were jazzed up on bean juice and to check if we're still on to go meet Rupert Gold tonight?"

"We are, yes. I suggest you come over here around six. Getting to Camden from here will require quite a few changes and you know what the tube is like in rush hour."

"Yep, sometimes makes me miss living in a place where you can drive a car without trouble. Anyway, I'll be here at six. For now I'm gonna head down to the nearest library and do some searches. I thought I'd see if there are any other books published and printed by this Joseph DeLuca guy. What was his business called?"

"*DeLuca*. I know, not very inventive. Feel free to dig around but I doubt you will find anything, Miss Swan. As I said, he mainly focused on documents for lawyers and printed products for companies, nothing that would be stocked in a library or even preserved beyond its usefulness back in the day."

Emma shifted her footing. "I know. But I have to do something until we meet up tonight. I feel like I'm wasting my time and your money just waiting around."

Regina cleared her throat. "Ah, yes. Speaking of which. Are you... still comfortable with being paid when the mystery is solved?"

"What do you mean? That's what we decided when you hired me, isn't it?"

"Yes, but this whole business is rather dragging on. Perhaps I should have been paying you by the hour. I know you haven't been in London

for long enough to build up much capital and this city seems to eat money, are you financially comfortable or do you require an advance?"

Emma's pride prickled a little but she knew that Regina was for once being both reasonable and caring. She made sure to arrange her face to look carefree and grateful.

"No, thanks. I'm good for now. I've still got some savings left and as Eugenia and Ruby are letting me live in their spare room for half the going rate, I seem to be stretching my money pretty far. Leave the fee for when I have actually accomplished something. If you want to help out with my finances, just keep buying me dinner."

Regina smirked. "You only want me to keep buying you dinner because you are expecting the same outcome as last night."

"Hey now! We aren't meant to be talking about stuff like that when we are working, Miss Mills. We separate fun and business, remember?"

Regina managed to hide that smirk and look stern. "Fine. In that case, go away so I can get some work done. Make sure to come back at six, I do not like to be late."

"You've got it, boss. See you tonight."

Emma left with a cheerful chime of the bell above the door. Regina tried not to smile as she sipped the heavy-duty coffee Emma had brought her. She also tried to ensure she didn't finish all of it, caffeine shakes was not a good look when greeting customers.

The possible customer was holding a snowglobe. Well, it had been a snowglobe, now however, it was severely lacking in fake snow. What had made Rupert buy it and put it in his shop was the craftsmanship of the carved wood of the base and the contents of the actual globe. It wasn't a sweet Christmas scene with a snowman or children playing in

the snow. It was the grim reaper. Some morbid soul around the 1940s had created a wintery scene with a figure of death standing between two little gravestones and staring right at the person holding the globe. It was eerie, haunting and downright odd and therefore perfect for this peculiar little shop.

Rupert had found it at an auction and bought it quite cheaply, partly because of the lack of snow but also, most likely, because of the morbid motif. Still, it was an interesting curio and he knew that if more collectors had been at the auction he would have been in a bidding war. Luckily for him, the only people there were laymen collectors and a few newcomers trying to find chic things for their little hipster shops. None of them saw the potential in this snowglobe, probably because it would be tricky to sell, a problem which Rupert Gold didn't mind. He had a shop full of items that were tricky to sell. That was why he loved every single piece and why he spent most of his time ferreting out the right customers online.

The man in his shop today, the one holding the globe, was not one of those people. He was just a random bloke who had walked past the shop and stumbled in. Probably to buy a jokey gift for his girlfriend or just to look at weird stuff while he waited for his mates to finish work so he could meet them at the pub. It was about that time as it was ten to seven. Finally. Soon Rupert would close the shop and then... then Belle would be there. Belle with her beautiful eyes and her keen mind. Belle with her good taste in things and lily of the valley perfume. How had he ever been so lucky as to find her?

"Hey mate. Do you know that there's no snow in this thing? There's supposed to be snow, right?"

Rupert Gold looked up at the man with the snowglobe in his hand and a sceptical look plastered on his face.

"Yes. The snow has sadly vanished with time, it can however be replaced if you were willing to spend some time and money restoring this interesting piece."

"Ah, no. I think I want something that's not broken. It's for my mum. She likes funny things with skeletons so I thought she might like this but I don't want her to have to put work into something I only got her for a laugh. I'll get her something else. Do you have any of those weird little porcelain figurines? You know, the chubby little kids?"

Rupert managed to keep his face blank but in his head he was cursing in Romanian. Cursing always feels more forceful in Romanian, he found that out when he lived there as a young man.

"No. I'm afraid not."

"Right. Never mind then. I'll get her an Argos gift card or something. Cheers, mate."

Gold felt himself relaxing his tense muscles when the man left and hurried off towards the bus stop. He had put the snowglobe down perilously close to the edge and with careful hands, Rupert placed it back in the middle of the dusty shelf. The snowglobe was made with such good craftsmanship. Perhaps he shouldn't sell it? But then he couldn't very well keep it. He keeps far too many things and is running out of space in his little flat above the shop.

He checked his mechanical wristwatch. Nine minutes until Belle could possibly arrive. But then she wouldn't. The library never closes on time, there is always someone loitering; not willing to leave the warmth of the library or unable to choose what books they want. No, he knows that Belle will arrive a little later than seven. It doesn't matter. What matters is that she'll be here soon and he can kiss her again. Except that he can't. He just remembered that she won't be alone. Well, he can still get a hello-peck on the lips but nothing more intimate. Who was it she was bringing? Oh yes, a second hand bookshop owner and her hired private investigator.

"Interesting business that", he mumbled to himself.

He decided to go do some research on how to replace the snow in snowglobes as he waited for the clock to tick over to seven to allow

him to close the shop.

In their zeal to not be late, they were almost ten minutes early. Despite this, Regina walked fast towards the shop and Emma hurried after with a faint smile ghosting on her lips while contemplating her employer.

Regina had such purpose in everything. She walked as if the world might end if she didn't arrive at her destination soon. It was the same way she drank her coffee and the same way she made love. So purposeful, so focused, so passionate. Nothing was unimportant to this woman, she made it all *matter*. Emma suspected that was one of the reasons Regina's temper was so quick to blow up.

This fervour and precision in a person was new to Emma and sadly for her.... very attractive. She could see herself being loved with that forcefulness and discipline, but yeah... that wasn't going to happen so she thought it best to not dwell on it.

Luckily they were already by the shop. Regina looked at her elegant wristwatch and sighed.

"Damn. We're early. Never mind, we can go in and browse a bit, I suppose. Unless you want to wait out here for Belle?"

"Are you kidding? It's freezing out here. I'm going in. She'll find us in the shop when she arrives."

Emma walked up to the shop and opened the door. She was going to go in but something told her that Regina would probably prefer to be the first to greet their new acquaintance. She stood back and waved Regina forward.

"After you, Miss Mills."

Regina gave her a little smirk. "Quite the gentlewomen, aren't you?" As she passed close by Emma she lowered her voice to whisper; "as long as we are not in bed."

"Just trying to provide the services my employer wants", Emma said with a chuckle.

Regina was taking off her gloves and slapped Emma's hand with one of them in response to the inappropriate comment.

When she was inside the petite shop, Regina scanned the room and soon saw a man standing by the till. He was short for a man and had long, thin hair down to his shoulders and yet he looked exceedingly dignified and yes, handsome in his own way. He peered at Regina with a surveying look and she decided to introduce them right away, browsing the shop could wait.

"Excuse me, are you Rupert Gold?"

"Yes, that's me. How may I help you?"

"I'm Regina Mills and my companion here is Emma Swan. We were supposed to meet you and Belle here tonight but I'm afraid we arrived a little early. We thought we'd come in and admire your fascinating shop instead of waiting outside."

Gold walked towards them and they noticed that he walked with a cane. "Ah, I see. Well, I'm glad you decided to come in. Perhaps I can tempt you to become my last customers for the day."

They all shook hands and exchanged polite smiles.

"This is quite the place you have here," Emma said as she looked around the cramped shop.

"One of a kind, Miss Swan. Please, have a look around while we wait for our favourite librarian. I'll give you both 10% off anything you wish to purchase as you are friends of Belle's."

Emma nodded and began to roam the small shop. Regina felt a strange tug, a wish to follow Emma and see what she was looking at. She allowed herself the luxury of not analysing the wish but simply gave into it and walked after the blonde, peering up at the same shelves.

The shop really was quite petite, even more so than Henry's Books. Although what it lacked in floor space it seemed to try to make up for by being very oblong. The whole shop looked like a short, narrow corridor filled with strange items on rickety shelves with the till in one end of the shop and the glass frontdoor in the other.

Rupert Gold watched them survey the shop for a while. They were both unusually attractive women and he would wager that they had a lot of interesting secrets for him to sniff out. But he couldn't muster up the enthusiasm for it. He just wanted it to be after seven so that the door would open and the shop would be filled with a soft voice with an Australian accent and the scent of lily of the valley.

They all waited for Belle.

Hot and cold

Now that Belle had arrived, they were all standing around the little desk which housed the till. Regina had explained the story from the start, opting to include the burglaries and the note requesting the books. Belle had seemed appalled but Rupert hadn't even blinked. His gaze had been steady and fascinated, willing Regina to go on and give information even after she had finished her tale.

"Well now, what an absorbing mystery. You don't hear about occurrences like these every day. Miss Mills, are you sure that you really want the help of a foreign private detective, no offense Miss Swan, and an insignificant curio-collector? Perhaps this is a matter better left for the professionals?"

Regina stiffened but kept her voice polite, if somewhat cold, as she replied. "There is no reason why I cannot have both. The police are involved and they will place the matter in the hands of experts, that doesn't mean that you can't have a look as well. The more people that are looking into this *absorbing mystery*, the faster it can be resolved and I can get back to trying to make my father's shop profitable."

"I see. In that case, let us ignore the intriguing events around this and get down to what I suppose you need my help with: the books. So, this is a set of books filled with ominous gibberish about ravens attacking and haunting the person who wrote and published them?"

"Yes, I suppose that is the gist of the books."

Gold tapped the floor with his cane. "Hmm. I wish I had the books to inspect the contents. It's hard to tell you more just from the few quotes you have memorised and repeated to me. I'd so very much like to take a few days to study the text, see if there are patterns in what sentences are repeated and so on."

Emma took a step forward. "So, you think the police might be right about the books being some form of code?"

Rupert gave a mirthless chuckle. "Not in the way they seem to think. It's not some drug cartel or regular criminals who are after these books. If so they would have handled this with much more efficiency and violence. No, the people who want to get their hands on these books are clearly more clandestine and not normal criminals."

Emma looked impatient. "Yeah, we figured that out too. But my question was if you think the books might be important because they contain codes or at least can be used for codes?"

Rupert's fingers drummed a slow rhythm on the desk as he chose his answer. "It is possible. However, I recommend that you keep an open mind here. What else might make the books valuable? Think."

"We have been thinking, Mister Gold," Regina replied tersely. Emma looked over at her and was happy that she wasn't the only one growing impatient.

He held his hands up. "Alright, I didn't mean to cause offence. I was just trying to prompt your mind to what else the books might mean. If it's not the contents of the books that are important, perhaps it is their physical state."

Regina's brow furrowed. "Do you mean their binding? I assure you that they were normal hardcover bindings, bound with glue and coloured navy blue without any dust covers. The title of the books and the volume number of each individual book was embossed in white and written in Garamond, I think. They weren't leather-bound or artistically decorated, not artisan in any way. In fact, I'd say they were done cheaply and quickly."

Rupert hummed quietly as he thought that through. "Still, we can't rule out that they mean something more than just the words they contain."

"Sure they do. They also work as excellent paperweights," Emma replied. Regina immediately shot her a glance but there was mirth in the chastising look.

Belle looked at the three people next to her. They all seemed tired and lost in thought.

"Perhaps Rupert can do some digging in his books and old files? Ask around about this Joseph DeLuca, perhaps? For now I think we could all do with some food and some time to wind down from work," she said kindly.

Emma felt guilty as she had spent some of the day failing to find any info in the library and then just catching up on sleep and daydreaming about kissing Regina, but she nodded while the hardworking people around her all agreed.

Regina took her gloves out of her coat pocket and began to put them on. "Of course. We will leave you two lovebirds to your evening. Thank you for listening to my story, Mister Gold. And for agreeing to look into the matter. Do please call me if you find any leads or have an idea what the importance of these books might be."

"I will, Miss Mills. I'm sorry I couldn't be of any instant help."

"That's quite alright, I wasn't expecting you to crack this case wide open right away. Considering that it has been near two weeks since this first began, I just want some form of progress now. I'm afraid I'm not always a patient woman. So, in short, I'm glad to have your help," she said with a polite smile.

"Anything for a fellow custodian of old things, Miss Mills. You keep my beloved Belle in books and for that I thank you. They keep her occupied when I drag her along to endless auctions."

Belle laughed and caressed his stubbled cheek. She turned back to Regina and Emma. "I wish you luck with your investigation and I'll help

Rupert try to dig up some information. After all, that's what librarians do. Now, go and enjoy your evening."

Regina wasn't sure, but there was something in the way Belle said that which hinted at that she assumed that the two women now leaving the shop were spending the night together. She felt a chill run down her spine. Did they seem to be a couple? As obvious as Belle and Rupert was? She felt panic creep into her system.

As soon as they were out on the pavement Emma turned towards Regina while sniffing in the cold air.

"Okay, that didn't get us very far but it's a start, I think. What do we do now? Wanna go grab some dinner?"

Regina felt uncomfortable and that panic was still beating a shrill rhythm in her veins.

"No. No, I think it might be good if we have some time apart. I don't want us to end up treading on each other's toes and getting into another row. I think I'll try to recollect everything I can about the books and see if there might be some merit to what Gold said and then have an early night. I'll call you tomorrow and we can determine the next step."

Emma frowned. She had really looked forward to another night in Regina's warm, luscious bed and with her lips against Regina's warm, luscious lips.

"Yeah, sure. No probs. I might head to the nearest pub and get some food and a beer, then. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

She sounded nonchalant and Regina felt calmer for it. There was no pressure here. They were just having fun. There was nothing here that she could destroy. Emma walked off with a cheery wave and Regina felt her heartbeat slowly calm down. She took a few breaths and then headed towards the tube station. She was going to go back to her dark and calm apartment to be alone with her thoughts and a cup of chamomile tea.

Robin Locksley wondered if he was developing an ulcer. His stomach had burned for days and acid kept creeping up in his throat. But then, his body had good reason to react to the stress.

Yesterday he had been tasked by the mystery man to return to the Barbican with the books and hand them over today. He had brooded about it and realised that the safest thing for his family was for him to hand the books over. The problem was the idea of doing that had left him sleepless and cold. He knew it was wrong, he didn't know what these people wanted with the books but if they were willing to stoop to burglaries, blackmail and death threats... they obviously shouldn't get what they wanted. So he hadn't brought the books with him to the station and he hadn't gone to the Barbican to meet the mystery man.

His plan was that he was going to inform his boss about his stupid mistake and offer to leave the Met quietly. Then they could protect him and Marian. Perhaps he could even leave without them pressing criminal charges for the damage he might have done to this case if he confessed and cooperated. Surely they would understand that he had meant well and that he never thought their adversaries would be this big of a threat. How could he have known that?

But the day dripped away. There were jobs to be done and he kept pushing the moment he would confess in front of him. It wasn't just that his career would be over, it was the shame of doing something so foolish, just so he could play the hero. So he kept procrastinating. *I'll tell them after I file this. I'll tell them after I have my tea to brace myself. I'll tell them after lunch.* And so it continued. When it was time to leave his shift, his nearest in command had already gone home. Robin had missed his chance. He felt relieved. Panic had set in so deep that being robbed of the chance to make a decision felt like a blessing.

However, the panic came back right away, because what would be the consequences of his reluctance to act? If the police didn't know about the books, they couldn't protect him and Marian. Were they at risk now?

Robin decided that if the mystery man or his associates came for them, he would say that he handed the books over to his boss. Maybe their sources wouldn't blow his cover right away? Or perhaps he could say that he lost the books or that they were ruined in a fire? He couldn't just hand the books over, he might be a fool but he was a fool working for the Metropolitan police, he couldn't let the criminals win.

With shaky steps and stomach acid burning at the back of his throat, he went home. As he walked through the door he saw their son Roland come running towards him with glee. He picked up the boy and hugged him tightly, breathing in the clean scent of his soft hair.

Marian came to greet him too, but she wasn't as happy to see him as Roland had been. She looked grave and her lips were pressed so tightly together that they looked almost bloodless.

She forced a smile when she bent down to speak to their son though. "Roland. Why don't you go get the new toys we bought in the toy shop earlier? Daddy hasn't seen them yet!"

He gave a happy yelp and rushed off towards whatever room he left his new toys in. Marian walked close to Robin so he could hear her whispers clearly. "I took Roland to the toyshop today to buy him a couple of toys for being so good when he fell and hurt his arm last week."

Robin nodded with a look of confusion. "Good. I'm glad he got his reward for being so brave at the hospital. But, why do you look so strange? Marian, what's wrong?"

She looked around but Roland hadn't returned yet, he probably got distracted by the toys and started playing with them as he normally did.

"When we got back I found this on my pillow. My pillow, Robin! They had even tucked the bedding over it nearly so I only saw a little edge of the note sticking up. If we didn't have dark green bedding I wouldn't even have found it until I went to bed tonight."

Robin took the note she was holding and read it with a lump in his throat.

Please inform Constable Locksley that he is lucky that we will give him another day to give us what we want. If he fails to hand them over tomorrow as well, we will not be so forgiving. The head that normally sleeps on this pillow will be severed and so will the little boy's. Even if your husband confesses and hands over the items to the police, we will still come to claim two heads, Mrs Locksley. The metropolitan police cannot protect you from us. We are everywhere. Do not let him test our patience further but simply be grateful that we showed mercy today. Three pm. Same location as last time.

Robin looked up at his wife in terror.

"I'm so sorry, Marian. I'll fix this. I'll give them what they want. And then I will explain everything to you when I have."

When the sun finally peeked through the clouds the next morning, it nearly blinded Emma who was out on her daily run. She squinted at it and cursed it in her head. She had been cursing everything this morning. Her bad mood had to be down to hormonal changes, she should get her period tomorrow. Yeah, that had to be it. It couldn't be connected to a certain hot-and-then-cold bookseller who brushed her off last night. *Well actually, maybe it's both that and the PMS*, she thought to herself glumly and picked up the pace. After a while she was almost back at the diner and when she ran past Henry's Books she slowed down a little.

She looked through the window and saw Regina talking to an old man with a grey goatee. He said something that made her laugh and Emma's stomach turned into a knot. She wanted to be the one to make Regina laugh. *Jesus, Swan, get yourself together*, she berated herself and sped up again for the last bit of the run.

When she got back she gulped down a big glass of water and had a shower. When she came out she sat down with a second glass of water

and her phone. Regina still hadn't called. She emptied her glass and put it down on the floor with a clang. Fine, if Regina wasn't going to call, she would. A few signals went through before Regina picked up.

"Hello Emma. Sorry for the delay in answering, my mobile is always in my handbag. I'll give you the shop's number so you can ring that next time. How are you?"

Missing you, Emma thought. "I'm good. You? Got back alright last night?"

"Absolutely. No scary people jumping out and requesting old books or anything. I'm sorry I haven't rung you this morning. I actually had a few customers for once and then an old friend of the family stopped by and, well, the morning ran away with me."

"Not a problem. Just thought I'd check in."

"I'm glad you did," Regina replied. They both heard the warmth in her voice, there was no disguising it, and they both winced at it for different reasons.

"Good. So. Um, I was thinking about the police. Have you heard from them?"

"No, but they usually work quite slowly so I'm not surprised."

"Yeah, I get your point. But maybe you should call them and ask where they are up to?"

"I suppose that couldn't hurt. Perhaps if you come over here for lunch, you can be here while I make the call?"

Emma tried not to smile. This shouldn't be all it took to make her smile like a lovesick teenager. "Yeah, sure. Want me to bring you some lunch?"

"Oh, I couldn't ask you... I mean...well..." Regina trailed off.

"Well what? Spit it out, boss."

Regina gave a little humming laugh. "I brought a salad to have for lunch but I find myself craving sushi. There's an Itsu a few roads towards inner London. Could I possibly ask you to pick up some salmon sashimi for me and something for yourself? I will naturally pay you back for both meals."

Emma felt strangely proud that Regina had asked. It felt like some form of progress. The fact that Regina had lowered her walls enough to talk about her cravings and ask Emma for favours felt like the ice was thawing a little. Or maybe it was just wishful thinking?

"Sure. I love sushi. I'll locate this place with the help of my good friend Google maps and then I'll go get us some salmon sashimi. See you at about noon?"

"If by about noon you mean 12.00 on the dot, then yes. That is when I will close the shop to have lunch and if you are late, I'm not letting you in."

The flirting tone was back in Regina's voice and Emma counted that as her second win during this conversation. Maybe last night's cold shoulder was just a one off?

"Understood, Miss Mills. Your sashimi and I will be with you at 12 sharp."

"Careful, Miss Swan. I might get used to this."

"Go ahead. Get used to it, I dare ya."

Regina scoffed. "I'll see you soon. Don't forget the chopsticks."

"I won't. See you then."

Emma hung up. Confused but smiling. She was sure she should be pissed off at Regina for sending such mixed signals but she couldn't make herself stop smiling. Her stomach growled and she decided that

there were bananas in her future if she was only having sushi for lunch later on.

Strange behaviour

Chapter Notes

Author's note: This will be the last chapter for a short while as I am going back to the motherland (Sweden) for a week. I'll start on chapter 23 as soon as I get back. Thanks for reading and reviewing (all six of you!) If you want to keep a closer eye on when I might update, follow me on Tumblr where I am Violetscentedwriter , or Twitter where I am VioletscentedSQ or on Facebook where I'm Violet Scented.

The salmon sashimi was good and Emma nearly swallowed hers whole.

Regina smiled at her. "You really should chew more. I can't imagine the torture you're putting your digestive system through."

Emma shrugged. "I know. I just get so hungry."

"You do have an impressive appetite."

Emma gave a snort of laughter.

Regina sighed. "Oh, I didn't mean *that*. I meant food, you pervert! Although... I suppose it applies in both areas."

Emma merely chuckled and kept eating. They were sitting at the tiny table in the shop's backroom and the cramped space meant they had to sit quite close. Neither of them was complaining about that.

Regina put her chopsticks down. "Speaking of our... physical activities. I want to apologize about last night."

Emma swallowed quickly. "No need. If you don't feel like having sex you just say so. There's no reason to explain or apologize for that."

Regina gave a faint smile. "That's true. But I am aware that I... seem to be setting the boundaries for what we do or do not do and I don't want you to feel that I take advantage of you or that I'm toying with you."

"Regina no, it's fine I..."

Regina held up a hand to stop Emma from speaking. "Please, let me finish. I'm horribly bad at talking about my emotions. I haven't had much practice at that, you see. I really want to make myself clear with you though. I value us working together and the enjoyment we both get from our sexual encounters and I don't want that to be ruined."

"Amen," Emma said and took a sip of water.

"So, to explain about last night. I... became worried that we were moving at too great a speed."

"Mm, we were moving kinda fast and that means we risk getting more involved than we planned. I get it. I was disappointed, sure. I mean, you are smoking hot and the sex is so damn good and I... really like you. But I know why you put the brakes on and it was probably good that you did. So thanks for opening up to me but there's really no need. I get it. Want some more water?"

Regina should have felt relieved, but she didn't. She had planned to explain her feelings more in depth, perhaps even touching on her fears about closer relationships. But no, the moment was gone. She felt herself shiver even though the room wasn't cold. She pushed her feelings back down and forced herself to look untroubled.

"Yes, please," she said and handed Emma her glass.

They finished the last of their lunch. Regina thanked Emma for getting the sashimi and paid for the meal.

"Right. Let's get dialling," Emma said. She picked up Regina's phone from her side of the table and handed it over.

Regina got out the card Constable Locksley had given her, cleared her throat and then dialled the number.

He answered and Regina turned on the speaker function.

"Hello Constable. This is Regina Mills. I was just calling to see if there had been any progress made in my case?"

The line went silent for a long time.

"Oh... uh... I... Well, I or that is to say we, are still working on it."

"Well yes, of course you are. I just wanted an update on where we are in the proceedings. Last time we spoke you mentioned that the books would be sent over to experts to be examined?"

"I don't have any updates for you right now, madam. I'll, um, contact you when I know more. I have to go now as duty calls. I will inform you if there is any progress. Thank you for your call."

The line went dead. Emma stared at the phone. "Wait? He hung up?"

Regina rolled her eyes. "Yes, he is an odd fish."

"I'd say he's more than *odd*, Regina. He sounded scared to me. Scared and hoping to avoid answering your questions."

"Considering he tried to place himself in the role of my protector and was sorely disappointed when he found out I had a girlfriend, I assume his peculiar behaviour is connected to that. Either he is worried that I felt harassed by his behaviour or he is uncomfortable with people who are... somewhere over the rainbow."

Emma stopped chewing her lip and brooding about the tremor in Constable Locksley's voice.

"Hang on. Okay, two questions here, Regina. One, why does he think you have a girlfriend? Two, why the hell did you just say 'over the rainbow'?"

Regina pursed her lips in annoyance. "I told him I had a girlfriend to get him to back off fast and then he saw you and made assumptions. 'Over the rainbow' is just my way of saying LGBTQ+ without having to spout a bunch of letters or using the term 'gay' and thereby erasing all women-who-love-women identities except for lesbians."

"Okay, fine, I'll swallow the Over the rainbow thing. Although, I think you might be better off just spouting letters. But I want to know more about the girlfriend thing. Do you mean to tell me that when I met Locksley and his partner, they thought I was your..."

"Girlfriend, yes. Well, you did arrive barely dressed at my side and you were very protective of me."

A slight blush crept into Emma's cheeks. "Was I?"

Without planning to, Regina smiled from ear to ear and let her hand softly caress Emma's cheek.

"Yes, you were. Very protective and very sweet."

Then she caught herself and pulled her hand back whiplash fast. She cleared her throat to get the tender warmth out of her voice.

"Anyway, he made his own assumptions and I assume that is why he sounded strange on the phone. Either that or he has forgotten about my case and was just reminded, but I doubt that."

"I don't think it's that simple, Regina. I think something's going on."

"That's because you're paranoid. Which I'm sure is a prerequisite for your new career as a private investigator, dear. Now, stop worrying about it and help me clean this table off. I need to open up the shop again and I don't want the scent of salmon wafting out there."

Emma merely hummed in agreement and started gathering up their chopsticks. But her mind was still focused on what Constable Locksley might be up to and why he sounded so shady on the phone. Shady and *scared stiff*.

After Emma had said goodbye to Regina and left the shop, she realised that this whole Locksley business wasn't going to leave her alone. She needed to talk to him and look him in the eye to see what he was hiding. She sat on her bed, mulling it over while staring at the wall, but deep down she knew that her stubborn mind wasn't going to give up. She had to go see him.

She grabbed her oyster card and headed for the tube. A few changes later she was within walking distance of New Scotland Yard. As soon as she was standing in front of the big building she realised how ridiculous this was. She had planned to walk in and ask for Constable Robin Locksley. But what if he was out on a case or if the receptionist started asking questions?

She stood there a while, trying to decide whether to go in or go back to the diner. After a while her decision almost made itself, because walking out of the big glass building was Locksley. And held in his right hand was Regina's tote bag with the books! She stared at it. Could he have just emptied it out and decided to keep the tote bag for his own use? No, surely not. Maybe he was bringing the books to forensics or something? But they must have a better system for that than police officers carrying things around London. Besides, he looked terrified. He kept looking around as if there was snipers taking aim at him. Something was obviously wrong.

Emma sighed and realised that the decisions was already made. She was going to follow him.

He walked fast and even with her own quick gait, she was struggling to follow and still keep a discreet distance. They walked to St James's Park tube station where Emma had to follow Robin down to the tube. She worried about getting into the same carriage as him but she knew

that if she got into the next one she wouldn't be able to see where he got off. She had to risk it.

She kept her head down and got into the carriage by the doors at the opposite end. Luckily Locksley had only seen her once and he seemed to be lost in his own thoughts now. He sat staring at the tote bag which he had placed on the floor between his feet. Now that Emma could sneak a closer look at it, it did seem to have the outline of the thick books in it.

Locksley stood up as they approached Moorgate and Emma waited until he had walked out the doors before getting up and hurrying after him. When they were out in the fresh air she soon realised they were heading to a strange set of grim-looking buildings. A sign told her that this was the Barbican centre. She followed Constable Locksley closely as this all looked like a big depressing maze to her and she neither wanted to lose him or get lost here.

All of a sudden he stopped. He put the tote bag down by his feet and then stood there, shifting his footing and looking around nervously. Emma hid behind the corner of the nearest building. After a while she spotted a man coming up a set of stairs. He was walking towards Locksley in slow, confident strides. She squinted to see him better and made out a wrinkled but dignified face and gleaming white hair.

The man stopped behind Locksley and began to speak. Emma could just barely make out the words.

"Good afternoon, Constable. Tell me, does that bag contain This Unkindness of Ravens?"

"Yes," he replied in a defeated voice.

"I'm glad to hear it. You made the right choice, lad. Now all you have to do is walk away and forget this ever happened."

"What if I can't? What if I feel that I have to inform my Superintendent about the books and my stupid choice to try and solve this bloody case on my own?"

Emma gritted her teeth. He hadn't handed over the books? What was he playing at?

"Our sources tell us that you didn't report a great many things. Not even to the fellow constable who came out to assist you after our second attempt to procure the books. Not only hiding the books but also keeping vaguely threatening messages like those to yourself? If you tell anyone about that, your career is over. How will you support your family?"

Christopher Steel paused to let this sink in before placing his hands nonchalantly in his coat pockets and continuing in his clear, crisp speech pattern.

"How will you look your wife and son in the eyes when they know what a mess you have made? Do you think your wife will believe that you were only being chivalrous? Or do you think she'll see the pictures of Miss Mills in the papers and wonder why her husband went to such preposterous lengths for such an attractive woman? Chivalry doesn't sound like the real reason when you say it out loud like that, does it?"

Robin made a croaking, whining noise. "Fine. I won't tell anyone. Just take the damn books and disappear from my life. Just please don't hurt my family and don't hurt... her either."

"Who? Miss Mills? Oh, we do not care about her anymore. Nor your family. All we wanted was the books, it's not our fault that you and this Regina Mills both made our procurement of the books so complicated. Now, run along back to you station, little bobby, and leave the bag where it is. I am sure we will both be relieved to never have to share each other's company again."

Emma could see Locksley clenching his hands into fists. But he didn't act on his emotions. He merely walked away, leaving the tote bag on the ground behind him. Emma wanted to shout at him, ask him what the hell he thought he was doing and why he had decided to screw up Regina's case like this. But getting those books back seemed more important. Now, she would have to follow this mystery man instead.

He bent slowly to reach the handles of the bag and then he walked off with it, as care-free as if the bag had been his all along. Emma followed him, assuming that this would be easier than tracking a young and fit member of the Metropolitan police. She was wrong. As soon as they were away from the maze of looming, dark buildings; the man began to move erratically to lose her and soon Emma spotted him checking the reflection in the windscreen of a parked car. He might have been suspected that he was being followed before, but now he was certain and they both knew it.

He sped up his steps. Emma followed suit while cursing under her breath. She had always been so good at following the bad guys as a bail bonds person, this guy must either be used to being followed or unusually paranoid to pick her out so soon.

The old man was about to cross a busy road ahead of them. The light just turned from green to red for pedestrians but as the street was empty, he obviously decided to risk it. He began to hurry across the road and Emma followed suit. That was when a motorbike came racing around the corner. The person on the bike tried to swerve and managed to avoid driving straight into the man. They did however knock him over and the crack as his head hit the road was loud and troubling. The motorcyclist sped off. A few tourists came rushing over and soon the man had a small crowd standing around him checking his pulse and calling 999.

Emma felt icy shock take over her body and had to force herself to not just stand still in the middle of the road. She made herself unfreeze and hurried over to the man too. One of the tourists said that he was breathing but seemed unconscious and another, the one who had called 999, said that an ambulance was on the way.

There was nothing more Emma could do. Not unless she was going to be a witness and admit to having chased a criminal into a main road and therefore being partly responsible for his accident. She considered doing just that. She could tell the police everything and once more give them the books. But then her shock-addled brain remembered how well that went last time and the possible consequences of her involvement in the accident.

And the books. The books were right there. Waiting in their tote bag right next to the old man. She could take them and bring them to Gold, he might be able to crack their mystery if he could just examine them. Then they could give them back to the police.

More people were gathering and Emma realised that her window of time for deciding was closing fast. More people meant that she would find it harder to take the books and walk off with them, and besides, the ambulance could be here soon. She didn't have time to think anymore.

She grabbed the bag and tried to nonchalantly walk away while the gathered tourists discussed if they should move him or perhaps loosen his tie so he could breathe easier. The last thing she heard as she walked away was one of them saying that they thought the man had stopped breathing and that they should turn him over to perform CPR.

Emma's breathing was unsteady and her heart seemed to be beating so hard that it hurt. What was she doing? Fleeing the scene of the crime? But what would happen if she stayed? What would happen to the books? She hurried to Moorgate tube station, needing to get as far away from the perplexing figure on the ground as she could. In her head she could hear the sound of the collision and the man's head hitting the tarmac over and over again.

The last safe place in London

Chapter Notes

Author's note: I'm back! Thank you for letting me know that there was more than six of you reading and reviewing. I am still working my way through the backlog of reviews, but please know that I read them all and will try to reply to them all in time. Happy Halloween (if you celebrate it).

The vein in Regina's forehead stood out and seemed to be pulsating with fury.

"What on earth did you think you were doing?! Do you have any idea of the harm you put yourself in?"

Emma looked away in anger, unable to face Regina. She had told her employer everything that had happened since she decided to follow Locksley and had expected a lecture but not this explosion of shouting and furious looks.

"Look, I did it for you! I get that you're worried about my safety, and that what I did was probably stupid, but I think you could show at least some sort of appreciation, you ungrateful bitch."

"Excuse me, did you just call me a bitch?"

"If the shoe fits, *Boss...*" Emma said in a voice dripping with venom.

"Perhaps you should spend less time insulting me and more time explaining your actions?"

"Perhaps you should get off my back! I'm in frickin' shock here and in no mood to put up with your shitty mood swings!"

"Don't for a second behave like I am the only one of us with problematic behaviour. If you stood up for yourself and argued your case we would have a different sort of relationship. If you tried to talk to me instead of stalking me, provoking me or fucking me to try to get to know me..."

"Hang on! Sex was your idea!"

"Oh really? Because I seem to recall you being the one talking about your physical attraction to me and then I was suddenly bent over a desk with your belt cutting into my wrists and your fingers knuckle-deep inside me."

"Because you wanted me to do that! You make all the decisions and then you whine that I don't talk to you about what I want? What the hell is that about, Regina!?"

"If you communicated better I wouldn't have to make all the decisions. Oh, and if we are going to change the topic to anything that has bothered us, perhaps we should discuss your prostitution jokes? I pay you for your investigating, not for what we do in bed. That line has to be drawn very clearly if this is going to work."

"What? What the hell are you talking about now?"

"You know! The joke about giving your employer what she wants you threw at me before we went into Gold's shop!"

"That was supposed to be flirting! You laughed at it! I'm not gonna make jokes where I make myself sound like a hooker. Jesus! I know that there is a line we can't cross with that. Get over yourself!"

"Fine. I suppose that was just in my imagination then! Just like your wish to shag me? It's all *me* is it? All me being difficult and causing trouble? Not you and your cocky, gung ho way of going about things? Because I think your actions today sort of proves my point. I told you

not to concern yourself about Constable Locksley and look what mess it got you into! You could have been killed, Emma!"

"Yeah, and if I hadn't done it... those books would have been in the hands of the criminals now, used for god knows what and we'd never know what the hell is going on here."

"Unlike now when we have the books but are also back in danger because the criminals will soon find out that we have them. Not to mention that you became entangled in a possibly lethal accident and I reiterate; *you* could have been the one who was run over! Don't you realise that you are more precious than any books or mystery?"

Emma let out a long breath, giving the impression that she was slowly deflating. She looked pale and Regina's heart gave a twinge. Why couldn't she make Emma see how reckless she had been and how worried she had just made her?

After a while, Emma spoke in a quieter and calmer voice. "Look, I'm sorry. Don't make me feel shittier about this than I already do."

They were both hurting and the situation demanded something. Regina felt that a hug might be too intimate, they had lines that she was trying not to blur. She was considering a squeeze of the shoulder and a joke to break the tension when Emma gave a broken, sobbing sigh. Suddenly she felt herself pull Emma into her embrace.

"Come here, you impossible creature."

Emma buried her face in the crook of Regina's neck and breathed in her perfume. She wasn't crying, but she knew she was close to it. She hadn't thought she was that upset, being angry at Regina had help mask the realisation of the gravity of the situation and the danger they might be facing now. But Regina's worried face and her statements about how her wellbeing was more important than solving the mystery or the books themselves; that had somehow crept in behind Emma's practised bravado. She felt cold even though the room and Regina's embrace was

warm, her brain helpfully pointed out that it was probably shock and the adrenaline leaving her system.

Regina caressed Emma's back, gently and calmingly. They both clung to the embrace. It felt like the last safe place in London right now. It was hard for her not to kiss Emma's hair and murmur comforting words, but Regina managed to contain it. Instead she cleared her throat and spoke.

"So, Private Detective Swan... what do we do now?"

They moved away from each other and both tried to look casual and professional, which was hard as they couldn't quite face each other.

Emma straightened up and took a deep, shaky breath to calm herself while she thought of a good answer.

"No police, not yet anyway, they just mess things up. We should try to investigate a bit on our own before involving the cops again. The bad guys, whoever they are, don't know we have the books yet. So we keep them hidden and see what we can find out with Gold's help. BUT, if there is even a whiff of trouble, we take the books back to the cops and hope that they actually do something with them this time."

Regina's hand rested on her flat stomach, as if she was trying to protect it from the fear and stress building inside her. "Alright, I agree with your plan. We will hold onto the books for a while and let Rupert Gold have a look at them. By the way, why do you think Locksley's partner didn't report his misconduct?"

"Maybe she didn't know. What that old guy said seems to point to that. She was only there for backup, maybe that was her only involvement in the case?"

They heard the bell above the shop door go. They were standing in the cramped backroom to have this conversation and as she heard the sound of the bell, Regina instantly made a move to go out to greet the customer. She glanced back at Emma and said quietly, "Wait here."

Regina stepped out casually and smiled at the middle-aged woman who was browsing the shelves.

"Hello there."

The would-be-customer looked over at Regina. "Hello."

"Welcome to Henry's Books. I'll let you have a look around and I will be right out as soon as I finish a quick conversation with a supplier."

"Of course. Take your time, I'm only browsing."

"Splendid, thank you."

Regina went back into the backroom.

"Will you be alright? Would you like me to ring Mary to come and man the shop while we go somewhere and continue this conversation?"

"No, I'm fine. I'll just catch my breath and maybe make myself a cup of coffee in here if that's alright? I kinda need a sit down and something hot to drink. Then I'll take the books over to Gold."

Regina went over to take the ground coffee beans and a clean mug out of the cupboard and then placed them within Emma's grasp.

"Actually, would you mind waiting with handing them over to Gold? Leave the books here for the moment, I would like to have another look at them before they are out of my reach again."

"Sure, they're your books."

"Thank you. I'll have a look at them when there are no customers around and then we can take them over to Gold together tonight, perhaps?"

"Alright."

Regina knitted her brows. "After that... would you like to... Well, you know: work off some steam together?"

Emma looked uncomfortable. "Actually, I'm on my period. Sorry about the buzzkill. But I mean... if you don't mind that, there is still stuff we can do."

"Yes, of course. As long as you are not in too much pain?"

Emma looked Regina up and down with a hint of a smile. "What pain I'm feeling will bother me a lot less if I get to watch you take that dress off."

Regina's smirk went from flirty to hesitant in the blink of an eye. She liked the idea that Emma wanted her despite everything that had happened today, but the problem was that she couldn't see them ripping each other's clothes off tonight. She could see Emma clinging to her like she had in their hug earlier and she could see herself worriedly checking Emma's precious body for injuries she knew wouldn't be there.

"Actually, perhaps we should give it a miss tonight, Miss Swan. I don't want us to get too used to spending so much time together. It might... muddle things and complicate our arrangement. Perhaps our earlier argument and your period is fate telling us to wait a little before spending the night together again. To slow things down a few more notches, so to speak."

Emma was about to argue but then realised that the fact that she wanted to heatedly argue was proving Regina's point. She was getting too attached and she wanted Regina for comfort tonight, not for casual sex. She sighed. "Okay, fine. Yeah, maybe you're right."

"Besides, so much has happened. We probably need some solid sleep and time to think after we have dropped the books off."

"Yeah, I guess. Well, in that case I don't really have much to do now. I mean I've looked at the books a lot on the way over here and they don't make any more sense to me, so my bit of investigating is kinda done there. I don't know what other jobs I can get on with while you have the shop open."

"You've had a nasty shock. I suggest you rest, eat and maybe exercise lightly. Get yourself balanced again. Perhaps lose yourself in a good book and just let yourself recover a little. Then you can come back when I close the shop and we can grab something to eat on our way to Camden to hand the books over to Gold."

Emma nodded slowly. "Yeah, good idea, but I don't think I could focus on a book though. And annoyingly, I don't have a TV in my little room at the diner and the WiFi is too crap to properly stream movies. Never mind, I'll figure something out."

Regina hummed pensively. She looked like she was mulling over a difficult decision. Then she sighed resignedly and went to pick something up from her handbag.

"Here are the keys to my flat. Don't cause a mess and DO NOT SNOOP. Touch anything that is off bounds and I will know about it. There is food in the fridge and a small shelf of DVDs next to the TV."

"Really? You'll let me hang out at your place today?"

"Yes. However, note that it is a one-off, simply because you have had a traumatic experience in my employ and I feel responsible. Don't make me regret it."

Emma felt stunned. This came from the woman who hadn't wanted Emma to even look at her old photos. This was a clear sign of trust and affection, no matter how Regina tried to downplay it. Emma wasn't sure, but she assumed that making a big deal out of it would probably make Regina rescind the offer right away. She had to play it cool but still show gratitude.

"That's really nice of you, thanks. I won't make a mess. In fact, I might even do some dusting or something."

"No need, I keep my home pretty much immaculate. Cleaning helps me unwind. Oh, and there are.... hrm... tampons and sanitary towels in the cabinet under the sink."

Emma grinned at Regina's embarrassed tone. "Cool, thanks."

Regina turned on her heel to return out to her customer.

When she had left, Emma beamed and realised that she suddenly didn't feel so effected by the accident or the repercussions of them having the books again. She made herself coffee, making sure that there was a second cup for Regina left in the pot. Then she sat down to drink it, wishing there was milk on hand but knowing that Regina found milk in coffee to be an abomination.

She could hear Regina speaking to the customer and then the sounds of the till showing that Regina had made a sale. When the bell above the door tinkled out the information that the customer was leaving, Emma got up and cleaned her mug.

She walked out and saw Regina straightening books on a shelf opposite the till. She couldn't help herself, she walked over and let her hand lightly caress the swell of Regina's beautiful, round ass.

"Thank you for everything. I'll get out of your hair now."

"Good. Oh and Miss Swan. Do make sure to eat something, preferably something sweet, it helps with shock."

You've been sweet enough to manage that, Emma thought to herself.

"Sure, I'll raid your kitchen."

"*Raid* is such a disquieting word. Just look carefully, you know, like an adult?"

"Sure thing, mom. By the way, I made you a cup of coffee too. I thought you can have it while you examine the books. Call me if you need me. I'll be at your place; resisting the urge to go through your underwear" Emma said as she left the shop.

Regina shook her head with a smile and returned to straightening the books that the customer had shifted out of place. She tried not to worry

about the far too affectionate gesture of letting Emma stay at her flat today. She also tried to avoid thinking about Emma in her kitchen, on her sofa and maybe even in her shower. Those thoughts led to far too much distraction for both her heart and her crotch, and that was troubling.

Take this waltz

When Emma walked into the bookshop, flipping the Open sign to Closed on her way in, she felt strangely uncomfortable. She had spent the day at Regina's and it had been safe and comfy but she had felt like she was trespassing. She wasn't sure if it had felt like trespassing because she was in the personal habitat of someone very private or because of her own confusing feelings towards Regina.

Everything smelled of Regina there. The scent of her expensive perfume was on her coats and scarves in the hall and on the sofa. The smell of her shampoo, or possibly her hair products, were on the pillow at the edge of the sofa and the natural, warm scent of her skin seemed to be everywhere. Or maybe that was just in Emma's head.

One way or another, Emma had felt like she was surrounded by Regina and yet without her being present. It had felt weird and inappropriate. Despite this, she hadn't been able to make herself leave. She had sat there, feeling the presence of Regina and fought the urge to go spend time with her at the shop.

After 15 minutes of pretending to look through a coffee table book on interior design, she had given up and gone into the bedroom. She felt horrible about it, guilt pushing bile up her throat, but she had to touch the pillow where Regina slept. She had to look at the bed where they had made love a couple of nights ago.

The bed had smelled of Regina too of course. It had been so inviting. But she couldn't cross that boundary, she couldn't lay down on the bed and bury her face in Regina's soft pillow and breathe her scent in. Anyway, she didn't trust herself not to lose control when all the memories of their lovemaking came flooding back. The last thing she wanted to do was mark the bed with her own scent by grinding against the duvet.

She had gathered her self-control, gone back to the living room and sat down to watch some Japanese movie about two girls who met some weird creatures. It wasn't Emma's thing but it was the DVD that had been in the player and she was too disturbed by her emotions to bother changing it. And she had to admit, it intrigued her curious mind that this was what Regina would choose to watch. Yeah, it seemed sort of pretentious to watch a Japanese movie, and that was in character, but it didn't seem like Regina's style to watch something animated about cute furry creatures.

Asking about that seemed like a good icebreaker now that she was back in the bookshop. Regina was closing down the till and Emma could see the tote bag with the books by her feet.

"Hi."

"Hello, Miss Swan."

"Is it Miss Swan when we are working and Emma when we are... not working?"

"To be honest with you, I haven't given it much thought. I merely say what comes naturally to me in the moment."

"Okay. Well, thanks for letting me hang out at your place. I left it the way I found it. I even washed up the plate and glass I used and put them back where I found 'em."

"Good girl," Regina said distractedly as she turned a key on the till.

The words made Emma smirk. She had heard Regina say that once before, but then she had been between the brunette's legs and the words had been automatic words to make Emma continue the ministrations of her mouth. The only thing the two occasions had in common was that Regina seemingly hadn't realised her choice of words. Emma Swan considered herself many things but she hadn't thought of herself as a 'girl' for many years, no matter how good she was being.

"I did end up watching a movie by the way. I watched the DVD that was already in the player."

Regina was busy turning the lights at the other end of the shop off and replied with, "I see. I'm afraid I don't know what that was. I spend my evenings reading books or on rare occasions watching TV with the Nolan family" over her shoulder.

"I didn't catch the name of it. It was an animated Japanese thing?"

"Oh that," Regina looked flustered in the light of the two remaining fluorescent lights. "I was watching it with Henry when I babysat him during his parent's anniversary last month. 'My neighbour Totoro' was a favourite of mine when I was younger and I wanted to show it to him. Of course, he wasn't used to reading subtitles so we had to watch the dubbed version but I think he enjoyed it. He was certainly agreeable when I suggested watching more Studio Ghibli movies next time."

Emma flashed her a warm smile. She loved seeing the softer, hidden sides of Regina and she wanted her to know that she in no way was judging. "Cool! It was cute actually. I kinda liked it, as soon as I got what the hell was going on. I have to admit though, I watched it in English too."

Regina gave a pretend-scowl. "Emma! When possible, movies and books are always best enjoyed in the language they were created in."

"Oh sorry, Miss Culture. Some of us weren't born with silver spoons in our mouths and Japanese shows on our TVs."

Regina had turned away to hit the last two light switches and plunge the shop into darkness, but now she stopped herself and turned back to Emma with a pensive look.

"You do know that I wasn't rich growing up? Yes, my mother was always a snob but she was more of a cultural snob than one based on wealth. She said that sophistication wasn't just for the rich and noble."

We always had to pretend to have more money than we did, but we weren't wealthy by any means."

"Really?"

"Really. When my mother met my father he had some money due to an inheritance from a rich uncle who basically owned a third of Lanzarote, the island my father came from. But Daddy was never very good with money and lost most of it investing in friends businesses and running his bookshop more as a hobby than a real business. We were never poor but we didn't have our coffers full either."

She paused and gave a muted chuckle. "I didn't leave the country before I was 17, something which might not mean much to an American but it does to a European. Here you can travel for two hours and suddenly be in a different country with another currency, language and culture. Most of my classmates, whose parents were dentists or builders, went to sunny places on holiday or at least took the ferry over to France. We saved our money to put up what Mother called a 'respectable front' instead."

Emma took in the information and mentally re-evaluated some preconceived notions about the woman in front of her. Asking more about her money situation seemed rude but travel must be fair game.

"So, where did you travel when you were 17?"

Regina smiled. "Lanzarote. We went to stay with Daddy's family. Mother hated it, she wanted to go to Paris, visit the Louvre and spend our travel money eating over-priced macaroons on the Champs-Élysées."

"And what about you?"

"Hmm?"

"Where did you want to go?"

"Oh, I was happy with Lanzarote. I could wear my short jeans skirt that Mother hated and enjoy the scorching sun on my skin. And it was nice to see Daddy so relaxed and happy to see his relatives. It didn't hurt that I could see Mother being furious all the time, we fought a lot back then and her defeat was my victory."

"But I bet it wouldn't have been your first choice of holiday spot if it was up to you."

Regina laughed. The warm, chiming sound of that deep laugh filled the room and heated Emma's skin. "No. I was 17. I wanted to go to New York or Tokyo. One of those big cities I had read about in books and that seemed so different from London."

"Did you ever go to those places?"

"Oh yes. In my previous job I earned good money and when I managed to take time off from my busy schedule, I saw quite a bit of the world. Sometimes I would even get to take work trips to other branches, especially here in Europe."

She paused again and looked up at the ceiling. "A few of my favourite places in the world are European cities, actually. Prague, Edinburgh, Copenhagen and Vienna. It makes me sad that the one time I have been to Vienna I only had time to see the hotel and the conference hall where I attended a few meetings and a conference. My mother always spoke of Vienna as a prime location for history and classical music."

"Yeah, it is."

Regina tilted her head to peer over at Emma. "You've been? I mean, you've told me about your wandering ways but I didn't think that Vienna would be your cup of tea?"

"That'll teach you to make assumptions. I'm a Leonard Cohen fan and I love 'Take this waltz', so naturally I had to spend some time in Vienna and see if I could find that lobby with nine hundred windows."

"Pardon?"

"It's part of the lyrics. You know... *Now in Vienna there's ten pretty women, There's a shoulder where Death comes to cry, There's a lobby with nine hundred windows...*"

"No, I didn't know. I don't think I've heard that song, actually."

"What? Okay, this has to be remedied."

Emma got her phone out and started browsing through her music.

"Emma, do we have time for this? Shouldn't we be heading to Camden to drop off the books?"

"I'm sure Gold will still be there when we're done. He doesn't close until seven, remember? If we do miss him you can just call him on his cell."

She found the right album and clicked the track. Soon the music began to play and Emma looked expectantly at Regina. The brunette was standing with her arms crossed over her chest and slowly closed her eyes to listen to the music. She was breathtakingly beautiful in her tight blue dress and her long, soft hair framing her exquisite face. Emma wanted painfully much to kiss her.

She couldn't stop herself from walking closer. She could smell Regina's perfume now and it reminded her of her longing earlier in Regina's flat. Leonard Cohen's deep, husky voice was singing about a piece that was torn from the morning and hanging in the gallery of frost and Emma felt like she would break if she couldn't be close to Regina.

Regina opened her eyes and began to say something. "I like the..." She stopped when she noticed how close Emma was.

"What are you doing?"

Cohen had begun the chorus about taking this waltz now and it fed Emma an excuse for getting so close. "I wanted to ask if you wanted to

dance. Do you waltz?"

Regina stiffened and let her arms drop to her sides. Her eyes looked wary but she wasn't moving away from Emma.

"Badly, but yes I suppose I do. Mother thought it would be refined skill to tell people I had so she taught me in our kitchen when I was about twelve."

"It'll come back to you. It's easy, really. All you need is the basic steps and rhythm and then a partner who you're in sync with. I can lead if you want."

Emma could see Regina blink nervously a couple of times. "Alright."

She took Regina's hand and placed it around her shoulders and then clasped the other one in her own. When her free hand found Regina's lower back she could have sworn she felt a small jolt of electricity. Touching Regina felt so right.

She moved them away from the shelves while dancing and tried to steer clear of all the obstacles in the little shop. Regina followed beautifully and Emma had to force down the thought that it was just like when they were making love. It amazed her that they could have such issues when talking and interacting but none whatsoever as soon as their bodies were involved. Sex and dancing just seemed to happen effortlessly with them, it was like their bodies were meant to be together.

The room was only half-lit but neither of them noticed. They swayed to the music in perfect waltz rhythm and when they got to the part where the song became a duet, Emma felt her heart lifting. This song had meant a lot to her and had always seemed to have a certain magic, but it was nothing compared to how it felt when she was dancing with Regina to it.

Regina's eyes stared deeply into her own and seemed to show an inordinate amount of emotions. Emma couldn't decipher them but she still felt faint at the beauty of Regina's warmly brown and enigmatic eyes.

Leonard Cohen sang *My mouth on the dew of your thighs , And I'll bury my soul in a scrapbook, With the photographs there, and the moss , And I'll yield to the flood of your beauty* and Emma felt her heart race. She felt overwhelmed by the moment and what she was feeling for Regina. There was no fooling herself anymore, she was in love.

They kept dancing, the dreamlike and elegant mood of the song and the deeply shared moment only broken momentarily when they stumbled into a bookshelf and had to laugh.

As the song came to an end, Emma leaned forward and put her forehead against Regina's. Regina didn't shy away. The last of the song faded out and they stopped dancing. Now they were standing still in an empty bookshop, their hands still clasped and their arms around each other and their foreheads softly pressed together.

"You are full of wonderful surprises, Emma. I find myself torn between wanting to find all of them out at once and wanting you to slowly reveal them to me one by one," Regina said in a husky voice.

"I'm an open book. If there is anything you want to know, just ask me or just look closer. It's all there for you to read."

Regina's red-tinted lips shaped into a smirk. "Good. I do so love reading."

Emma chuckled and let the hand on Regina's lower back caress up her spine.

Suddenly there was the sound of voices outside. A bunch of young men walked past the shop discussing football loudly. It broke the spell and Regina quickly moved away from Emma before speaking.

"It's... getting late. Perhaps we should get ready to go eat something and then go drop off the books with Gold."

Emma cleared her throat and put her hands in the front pockets of her jeans. "Yeah. Of course. Wanna drop in at the diner or maybe go to that Itsu place and get some salmon sashimi again?"

"Sushi sounds nice. Would that be okay with you?"

"Sure. We'll stop there and fuel up on fish and then head over to Camden."

"Agreed."

Regina switched off the remaining lights, locked the door and turned on the burglar alarm. Then they headed out to get that salmon sashimi with the mysterious books weighing heavily in the bag in Regina's hand.

Emma's beauty and Regina's discovery

Chapter Notes

Author's note: I'm going away again (this time it is more work-related) so there probably won't be another chapter until next week. If you want to keep an eye on when I might update, follow me on Tumblr where I am Violetscentedwriter , or Twitter where I am VioletscentedSQ or on Facebook where I'm Violet Scented. Thank you again for reading and reviewing!

As they walked from the tube towards Gold's shop, they spoke about the books and Regina's thoughts after having had another look.

"In most aspects I found them to be just as I did before this debacle started; perplexing contents and cheap but normal bindings and covers. I did however notice something which might be worth investigating. I might be reading too much into it, though. We will see what Mr Gold has to say about it."

"What? You're not going to tell me what it is?"

"Ha! No, I'm afraid you'll have to wait."

"And to think I waltzed with you. You're a cruel woman, Regina Mills."

Regina's quirked eyebrow didn't take the attention away from her smirk. "Really? I just bought you dinner and a take away box of chocolate mochi. That doesn't sound like the actions of a cruel woman to me."

"It could be. You might be trying to make me fat and then refuse to sleep with me."

Regina glared at her. "First of all, I am not shallow enough to stop desiring you if you put on weight and secondly you are too sexy to ever worry about anyone not fancying you."

Emma laughed and bumped Regina with her shoulder. "Flattery won't get you a discount on my detective work, you know."

"It wasn't flattery, it was the truth. Now shush, we're here and I want us back in professional mode."

"Fine, but if we stay long enough for my mochi to get warm and start to melt, I'm eating them - professional or not."

"Remind me to never employ someone I find on a notice in a diner's window," Regina replied.

Then she opened the door and held it open for Emma, who quickly slid past her and cast a glance at the handbag where her mochi were being held hostage.

Emma quickly put her work-face on when she got inside and nodded courteously at Rupert Gold who was dusting some books about halfway down the narrow shop.

Gold looked perplexed as he saw them. "Oh hello Miss Swan, Miss Mills. I'm afraid I haven't had time to look into the matter of the books yet."

Regina gave her practised, polite smile. "Of course not, we hadn't expected you to. We are actually here to show you something."

"Is that so? Well, as you can see, the shop is empty at the moment. Would you like to quickly do it now or wait the remaining ten minutes before the shop closes?"

Emma gestured towards the tote bag that Regina had insisted on carrying all this way. "That bag contains the books. Long story short: we got them back from the police because they messed up and did nothing with them. We thought you would want to look them over ASAP. When you do that is up to you, I suppose."

Gold's eyes grew larger. "In that case, I believe the shop will close early tonight. Might I ask you to turn the Open sign in the door for me, Miss Swan? You move faster than I do with this blasted cane."

"Of course," Emma said and went to flip the sign.

Regina put the fabric bag next to the till on the little counter and began to take the books out. Gold watched raptly as *This Unkindness of Ravens* was piled up on his desk. Regina took a step back and indicated the stack of books.

"Here they are. I have had another look at them during quiet times in the bookshop today and I did find something which struck me as out of the ordinary. Please have a look and see if you spot what I did."

"Of course," he replied without taking his eyes off the books. Emma came back and watched him walk up to the books and run his hand over the top one. She mused that he looked like a math teacher who had just been presented with the most complicated and brilliant equation ever.

He rested his cane against the desk and used both hands to pick up one of the volumes. He opened the first page and began reading fixedly.

Regina walked over to where Emma stood and touched her arm.

"Why don't we let Mister Gold peruse the books in peace?"

Emma nodded and walked a few paces down into the shop. She stopped to look at a necklace in an ornate display case. It was faded, scuffed silver with a teardrop-shaped black stone.

Regina followed and looked at what had caught Emma's eye. "It's beautiful."

"Yeah, it is. You know, I've pawned all of my jewellery to have more travel money but I do sometimes miss getting dressed up in a nice dress and wearing a pretty necklace."

Regina reached out and with gentle fingers brushed Emma's elegant neck, right where a necklace would rest. "Your beauty would outshine any dress and any jewellery."

"Oh shut up," Emma said with a grimace.

Regina drew her fingers away and looked solemnly at the necklace.

"No, Miss Swan. I mean it. I fear you might be the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

Emma swallowed as a reaction to the earnest and affectionate tone of Regina's voice. She worried she might be blushing and she hurried to find something to say to diffuse the painfully tense situation.

"Oh, so now I'm a thing?"

Regina gave a quiet, defeated scoff. "What you are, Emma, is *incapable of taking a compliment*."

Emma was saved from having to respond by Gold's voice. "Miss Mills? I think I might have found what it was you were referring too."

Regina walked back to the desk, with Emma half a step after her.

Gold didn't look up as they approached.

"You were right about the binding being quite ordinary and to be honest; rather sloppily done, as if this Joseph DeLuca was in a hurry. I have only read a small portion of the book and I still want to see if there are any patterns in the text itself but yes... there is something else strange here."

Regina gave a slow nod. "The pages."

"Yes," Gold said and finally looked up at his guests.

Emma looked from Gold to Regina. "What about them?"

Regina looked back at her. "The pages feel... odd. They are thick and almost crumbly to the touch. Now that could be because DeLuca saved on paper quality, just as he did on the cheap binding, but... there is a small chance that there is something peculiar about the paper these books were printed on."

"Like what?"

Gold let a hand scrape along the slight stubble of beard on his chin before answering.

"That would be the question, Miss Swan. Conceivably the pages could have been created out of some unusual material or maybe they were dipped in something? As Miss Mills says though, it is more likely that the pages were simply made from re-used paper or went through an inferior bleaching process. One way or another, you should have them examined when I have finished analysing the text."

Regina put her hands on her hips and looked down at the books. "I agree. I have to admit through, I don't have the faintest idea of where to turn to have the pages examined."

"I think I can help you there, Miss Mills. I have a friend who works with authenticating antiques for some of the leading auction houses. He's very handy with a chemistry set and has analysed plenty of old books to evaluate age and authenticity, this should be well within his purview."

Regina looked impressed. "That sounds like a good place to start. Do you think he would be willing to help?"

Gold caressed the spine of the volume he was still holding. "I think he would be delighted. He loves a good mystery."

Emma chuckled. "Who doesn't?"

"Indeed, Miss Swan. Archibald would be glad to help?"

Emma's eyebrows shot up her forehead. "Archibald?"

"Yes. Archibald Hopper. He is highly esteemed within his profession and a very nice fellow to boot," Gold said without acknowledging Emma's incredulous tone.

Regina shot Emma a murderous glance. Emma merely looked wide-eyed at her and mouthed "*Archibald and Rupert?*"

Gold looked up and both women faced him without missing a beat.

"So, what do you say ladies? Will you allow me to examine the text and then send the books off to Archie Hopper to analyse these quite singular pages?"

Regina gave her polite smile once more. "Yes of course. Do please keep me posted as often as you can, since the police took custody of the books and did nothing with them, I am rather paranoid about what happens to the volumes now."

"Understandable. I will update you at every juncture. Thank you for your trust, you will not regret it."

"I'm sure I won't," Regina replied with a regal nod.

"I guess we should leave you to it, then," Emma said with a smile.

"Thank you. I'll take these fascinating books home and spend the evening and most likely most of the night reading them."

Emma huffed out a breath. "I wouldn't recommend doing that, I read quite a bit of them when I was travelling across London earlier today and they freaked me the hell out."

Regina gave Emma a comforting smile. "Yes, they are very disconcerting. Especially after a bad day." The last words sounded innocuous enough but both Emma and Regina knew what she meant. These books were not good reading material for someone who just saw a person be run down in the street.

"I will keep that in mind," Gold said with a slight smile.

They all said their goodbyes and the two women left the shop. They had walked a few paces away from the shop when Emma turned to Regina.

"Archibald? And Rupert? Hell, come to think of it... *Regina*? What is wrong with you people and your names? I have been to London plenty of times before and I seem to remember bunches of Sarahs, Trevors, Tracies and Stephens. Why do you guys all sound like you walked straight out of a Victorian novel?"

Regina glared at Emma. "Never mind that. The books are now dropped off in the hands of an expert and they will then pass to another expert for further analysis. I would dare to assume that we are out of danger for now and that we are making progress in the case. Why don't you celebrate by going home and eating your mochi in bed? I'm going to go home and have an hour long shower that's hot enough to make my skin sting."

Emma silently watched her brain come up with at least four different raunchy replies to that statement and valiantly kept herself from uttering any of them.

"Okay, boss. Should I call you tomorrow afternoon to see if there is any progress?"

"You could do that. Or you could drop by the shop at some point during the day and I can brief you on any pertinent information."

Emma kept herself from grinning. Regina wanted to see her. There was very little chance that they would hear from either Gold or his funny-named friend as early as tomorrow and yet... Regina suggested she

should drop by. *Winning*, Emma thought to herself. Out loud she just said, "yeah, that sounds like a good idea."

She was going to suggest that she could drop in with some lunch but she stopped herself. There was no way she was waiting until noon to see Regina again.

Fog descends

That night Emma dreamt of Regina. This time it wasn't the bossy bookseller being tied up and taken. It was her. It was Emma who was pushed onto the bed and straddled by a confident Regina who hissed "tonight I'm going to devour you whole." That seemed like something Regina would say and Emma woke up so very wet, wet and longing for that annoying clit-tease with commitment issues. No that wasn't fair. She had understood why Regina pulled away and it wasn't to tease. She was clearly frightened out of her wits.

Emma decided to ignore her arousal as she was bleeding and didn't want to wash her hands and/or possibly increase her cramping. She hoped that some cold air would calm her libido and got up instead.

Having slept naked, she pulled on yesterday's shirt and her panties and sat on the window sill and opened the window. The night was beginning to lighten into grey morning outside and showed an incredible amount of fog. It looked like someone had covered the city in smoke.

The cold night air did her good. Her sexual need was safely stored away for now, but her wish to see Regina wasn't. She thought about texting her. Perhaps she could make some flirty joke about having dreamt about her? Or maybe describe the dream and get Regina aroused enough to come running? No, she didn't need sex right now. She needed Regina to trust in her and in herself.

She decided against any contact. She was too emotional and needy from the lack of sleep to make much sense and to trust herself around Regina. What she needed was some more snoozing. God knows what she might say if she was face to face with those shielded brown eyes right now. She went back to bed and got a few more hours sleep before she was woken up by her phone ringing.

The place was silent, just as it should be considering the Oldboys club was closed. It was five in the morning so the club had in fact been closed for the past four hours. But the doors would always open for the three men standing in a circle. Normally they would be four but John Withers had called his two associates to inform them that they would never be four men again. Christopher Steel had died from internal bleeding in the skull about half an hour ago.

Withers was on good terms with Steel's wife, Marjorie, and she had called him to pass on the news of her husband's demise. Withers had said all the things expected of him and finished the call, then he had rung Darby and Llanza. They had decided to meet here; on neutral, and inconspicuous, ground as always.

The fog had been thick when they all travelled over to the club but it had been worth the trouble and the danger. They needed to regroup and discuss this. They had always been four men with one clear goal, four men who had fought so hard for so long and under such deep cover that none of them could recall a time when they weren't fighting. Fighting to learn the secret. Fighting to know more about what it was DeLuca had stumbled upon and hidden in those books. Fighting to use the power of that secret. Now they were three men and they no longer knew where the books were or who had been responsible for Steel's death.

Llanza broke the silence. "Perhaps it was just an honest to god accident?"

The others glared at him.

"Well why not? He was hurrying away to bring the books to safety and some young scoundrel was driving too fast and didn't see him crossing the street?"

"Then why would the books be missing," asked Darby softly.

Llanza shrugged. "Perhaps an onlooker took it? Or even the driver? They might not have known what was in it and hoped for something valuable?"

Withers took a deep, slow breath. "I hope you are wrong, Carlos. Because if these books ended up in the hands of someone who did not know their worth, they probably threw them in the nearest bin. No, for our own sanity and for the cause, we must operate under the assumption that someone stole those books on purpose. While that does mean that they killed Christopher for the books, it also means that his death meant something and he was not just another road accident."

Llanza peered up at the dark ceiling as he mumbled, "another victim for the cause. He will be remembered. "

Darby ignored that comment and searched Withers face. "Do you think it might have been Constable Locksley who ran Christopher into traffic and took back the books?"

Withers hummed. "He might not have given the books to him in the first place. Perhaps Locksley showed up without the books but with a weapon instead and then chased Steel into traffic? There are many possible scenarios. Many that could have been averted if there had been backup. I cannot fathom why Christopher went alone. He could easily have brought a few henchmen with him for protection."

Darby looked down at his shoes as he pondered that. "He believed that Locksley was a frightened and broken man who would just want to walk away from this situation. To be honest, I agree with that notion. I find it hard to believe that Constable Locksley would have risked his family's lives by doing something so rash and violent."

"I agree. However, we still need to talk to him. Preferably the sort of talking which will not end up in lies and excuses. I know a man with a fondness for knives and letting his prisoners bleed until they are awake enough to answer but in enough agony to be completely truthful."

Llanza's accented, honeyed voice sounded almost gleeful as he spoke about torturing Locksley and his two companions glared at him again.

Carlos Llanza scowled back at them. "Oh do not look at me like that. You both have as much blood on your hands as I do. We have spent

decades looking for these books and many people have suffered at our mercy. I am merely more honest than tactful."

Withers held up his hand. "You're right. This must be done no matter what the cost is and we will not be squeamish. If you pledge to handle the investigation into what happened to Steel, we will not question or judge your motives. As you say, the blood is on all our hands."

Llanza gave a grave nod and Darby reached out and gave his shoulder a respectful squeeze. "Just be careful, Llanza," he added.

"We will do what must be done to unravel the secret and to honour Christopher's memory," Llanza said in quieter tones.

Withers nodded and intoned, "Non Omnis Moriar"

"Non Omnis Moriar," the other two echoed solemnly.

Regina couldn't sleep. She was never a sound sleeper but this particular night had turned out to be atrocious. She tossed and turned, feeling antsy and angry at herself. Her thoughts repeated in her mind as if they were on a vicious loop. The ones circling around the most was on the theme that she was ruining her arrangement with Emma by either pulling the blonde too close or pushing her too far away. Honing in on the latter theme, her brain had decided to put on extra repeats of one painful question: *why the hell were you gushing about her beauty so openly, you idiot?*

It didn't help that she kept having *Love will tear us apart* by Joy Division stuck in her head for some reason.

At one point she had abandoned her bed, which felt hot and stifling, and gotten up to drink some water and then read for a few hours on the sofa. Then she returned to bed and managed an hour or two of light sleep, but now she was awake again. She got up, put a robe on top of her silk pyjamas and padded her way to the window on her plush carpets.

London wasn't exactly quiet out there in the fog, it never was, but it was quieter than usual and it felt eerie. Regina realised that she felt alone. Alone in the city and alone in her own life. And there was that horrible tugging thought: maybe she didn't have to be. Maybe she could start a relationship with Emma and actually manage to maintain it without ruining everything. Perhaps Emma would want her even if she saw all the flaws, weaknesses and issues that lurked under her well-polished, harsh exterior?

There had been a moment when they waltzed. A moment where Emma had led her across the room with such affection in her eyes that Regina had found it hard to breathe. That was why she had been so stupidly romantic in Gold's shop. That look in Emma's eyes as they dodged the bookshelves and listened to the phone-tinny version of that Leonard Cohen song – it had almost convinced Regina to lower her walls.

Emma felt so safe, so real and so fascinating. How could such a creature ever put up with her? One day Emma would know how many people Regina had lied to, manipulated and mocked in her days. Sure, most of that was in her past now that she had identified that the way her mother raised her was wrong... but that didn't undo the damage she had caused in people's lives. She hurt people. Maybe she did it so they couldn't hurt her, like her therapist had said, but that didn't alter the fact that she hurt people.

And now here she was. On the precipice. Looking down and knowing that falling, falling for Emma, could mean hurting them both. Or should that be 'would' be hurting them both? Was there even any doubt?

Regina squeezed her eyes shut and felt warm tears clinging to her long eyelashes. She had been an idiot thinking that she and Emma could keep this physical. Emma was too unique to be just another sexual adventure. Emma Swan was radiant in her beauty and her soul... and so far out of her league that it wasn't even funny.

But how she wanted her right now. Not necessarily physically, but just there to speak to her. To see her. To feel that calming presence of the woman who had lived a rough life and still found her equilibrium deep

inside herself. Regina envied it, that comfort in her own skin that Emma had. But she also admired it and it seemed to calm even her when Emma was near. Problems seemed smaller and Regina's fury at the world seemed to calm to a simmering annoyance and sometimes vanish completely. As it had during that waltz.

That damned waltz. Regina rested her forehead against the window pane and cursed Vienna and Leonard Cohen and Emma but then...then she regretted the thought. No matter how frightening it was, Emma was awakening something in her and even in her insomniac blur Regina realised that whatever it was it was probably healthy. It stung and it terrified her but she was changing. Maybe she could change into someone who could be with Emma? Someone who could be good for Emma and not hurt the wandering free spirit of her?

She was about to cry and she scolded herself for it.

Go back to bed and sleep, you pathetic moron. You'll feel better when the fog has lifted, the sun is up and you have had some coffee.

She obeyed herself. Nestled up in her tangled sheets, she managed to get a few hours of broken, nightmare-riddled sleep. When she woke up she performed her usual morning ritual of getting some coffee on the go and then turning on the local news on the radio. When she did, she heard about a man who had been the victim of a hit and run near the Barbican centre and who had consequentially died from his injuries mere hours ago.

Regina rushed to her mobile phone and rang Emma. The detective's voice was drowsy and sweet with sleepiness and Regina had a passing thought about how often she ended up waking Emma.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Emma. But you need to either sit down and listen to the radio or come over here so I can tell you the bad news."

"Morning Regina. Calm down. What bad news?"

"I really think you should wake up a little before I either tell you or you check the news."

Suddenly Emma was wide awake.

"It's him isn't it? The old guy who had the books? Is he awake and talking about me?"

Regina grimaced and rubbed her bleary eyes. "No Emma. I'm sorry but... he's dead."

Revealed

Emma paced back and forth across the shop floor chanting one word repeatedly: shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

Regina has opened the shop as usual and the second she had, Emma had arrived like a whirlwind out of the fog. She was dressed in rumpled clothes and she clearly hadn't applied any make-up or combed her hair. She looked anxious and guilty. For once Regina was glad that the shop didn't have customers as Emma clearly needed to vent or she would do something rash. Again.

Emma ran her hand through her tangled tresses as she kept growling her profanity. She decided to shake things up by adding, "what the hell are we going to do?!"

Regina's tone was warm and soft when she replied. "Emma. As regretful as this man's death is, it doesn't really change anything."

"Of course it changes things! I've killed someone!"

"Firstly, no you haven't and secondly that wasn't what I meant, dear. What I meant was that we continue on with our plan. When it comes to what you are feeling... I'm sorry that you feel so guilty but trust me, you haven't killed anyone. It was an accident and one that might have happened even if you weren't there. He crossed a street without looking and the person on the motorbike was driving too fast. It wasn't your fault."

Emma gave a whine and stopped her pacing to rub at her eyes with the heel of her hands. She seemed at her wits end and Regina reflected on how odd it was that she had thought about Emma's calm and confidence just last night and now events had torn that calm into pieces.

"Emma. It's not too late to go to the police."

"And have them mess this all up again?"

Regina's brow furrowed. "It's up to you, we will do whatever makes this easier for you. If your conscience is troubling you, you might want to have it all out in the open. I would personally prefer that you stayed here with me right now, going to the police would mean hours of waiting and interrogation with them. However, I will fully support you if you need to speak to the police, I assume your moral code is stronger than mine."

Emma waved the statement away. "I'm no angel. But I know I should help if I can."

"Well, they have the man's identity from the driver's license in his wallet and the statements of the tourists who found him. The radio mentioned that a young man on a motorbike had come forward and was being questioned. No one seems to be mentioning a blonde woman who fled the scene, which makes me assume you were in a camera blind spot on that road."

Regina walked over to Emma and put her hand on her upper arm. "I'm not trying to sway your decision-making in any way here but honestly; I'm not sure what use you could be to the police at this juncture. They have the driver who did it and plenty of witnesses - unless you want to bring up the books - there is really nothing you can add to the investigation."

Emma sighed and Regina wasn't sure if it was with relief or defeat. "No, I guess not."

She looked so lost and vulnerable and Regina couldn't help but pull her into a quick and awkward hug. Emma leant her head on Regina's shoulder and sighed again.

Regina slowly moved away to be able to look Emma in the eye. She made her voice matter-of-fact. "It was an accident. You are not the villain here, Emma, these men who burgle and threaten are. And we

need to either fully hand the matter over to the police or stay the course. What do you want to do?"

"Stay the course."

"Good. Do you want to find Constable Locksley and ask him about what he knows?"

Emma shook her head. She seemed to be slowly coming out of her guilt-driven daze.

"No, he might suddenly go all dutiful and tell the cops about the books and hell... maybe even that I was there when the guy was run over, if we have to tell him about that. I think it's best we keep a low profile to be safe. You know, *trust no one* and all that."

"That sounds sensible. Then we don't mention this to anyone and we continue to wait for any results from Gold and his friend. Agreed?"

A slight amount of colour was returning to Emma's pale cheeks.
"Agreed."

"Good. Until then you can help me with something important in the shop as I know you'll want to keep busy today."

Emma looked surprised but relieved. "Um, sure. What?"

Regina smirked. "Dusting."

Emma gave a little chuckle. "Well, there are worse ways of earning a pay check. Let me go get washed up and changed AND let me get us sushi for lunch later on and you have a deal."

"Perfect! The dusters are in the back room when you return. Make sure to get the tops of the books, they get dustier than you'd think."

Emma grunted as she headed for the door but it was lacklustre at best.
"Sure thing, boss."

Emma's cleaning duty was all done by lunch and after she had fetched them sushi, she was at a loss of what to do. She ended up manning the till when Regina was showing the infrequent customers special volumes around the shop, but that didn't fill the afternoon.

So something rare happened; Regina let her guard down and allowed some occasional small talk. They talked about cities they had both been to and swapped funny anecdotes about exes. The fact that Regina was bisexual while Emma identified as pansexual lead to discussions about the difference between dating men and women and soon they had wiled away the afternoon with conversation and the occasional serving of a customer.

When it came to closing time, the question about whether they should spend more time together or not lingered between them. When they were outside the shop they both hesitated and cast uncertain glances at each other. It was highly undignified and Emma couldn't help but laugh at their childish behaviour.

"What's so funny, Miss Swan?" Regina's tone was sharp but the both knew she was being playful.

"We are. This back and forth and constant walking on eggshells... It's not really my thing. But if it's the price I have to pay to be around you, then so be it," Emma said with a shrug.

"I'm... sorry that I have made things so complicated. I usually know exactly what to do but the situation between you and me has me rather flustered."

Emma shivered in the cold, despite her earlier change into presentable yet warm clothes. The fog had a lifted slightly but it was still there and making the November air feel damp and bitterly cold.

"It's not just you. I don't know what to do either. I've...never felt like this. What we have is complicated but also... sorta special. God, that sounds so stupid."

Regina laughed. "Stupid but apt. Shall we go somewhere warm and discuss it?"

"I didn't think you'd want to discuss it?"

"I don't. But as this uncertainty is keeping me from my precious sleep and is obviously bothering you as well, I suggest we talk about it. Just not at that blasted diner, please. I want quality food tonight."

"Oooohh. Does that mean you are cooking?"

"No, it means I'm inviting you out to the French restaurant a few streets towards the city centre, just beyond the Itsu where you get our sushi. It's about a fifteen minute walk."

"I'm not a big fan of French food but I'll go if I get a reward."

Regina's eyebrow quirked in its customary way. "A reward?"

"Yeah. Tell me about your Sunday ritual and I promise to eat everything on my plate AND reveal a secret about myself to boot."

Regina laughed. "My, what a deal. Perhaps I will take you up on that. No promises though, I have given you much enough with agreeing to talk about what is going on between us. Oh, and even admitting that something might be going on in the first place. Don't get greedy, Miss Swan."

"Hard not to when I just can't get enough of you."

Regina smirked at her. "Ha! I see Detective Emma Swan, *seductress extraordinaire* is out in full flow tonight."

"Is it working?"

"You'll never find out standing here in the cold. Let's go to the restaurant and I'll keep you updated throughout the evening."

"Fine," Emma said with a cheeky smile.

A little while later they were sat at a table in the back of a nice restaurant with their newly ordered meals and an awkward silence looming between them. Someone had to go first. Someone had to show their cards. It surprised them both when it was Regina.

With her eyes fixed on the glass of wine before her and her voice strained with discomfort she quietly said, "have you given any thought to my tendency to... be somewhat submissive to you in the bedroom?"

Emma hid just how much taken aback she was by the question, especially in such a public place. But then Regina knew how to speak in hushed tones and the restaurant was almost empty in their little corner.

"Um, no, not more than to realize that I like it. I mean, I wouldn't mind it if you wanted to take charge a bit more, in fact I kinda had a dirty dream about that last night, but I suppose I do enjoy that there is one place where I'm in more in control than you. Is that important?"

Regina raised her eyes to look at Emma. "It's just that I normally don't... have that sort of sex. My bedroom encounters tend to be tamer. I don't want to use the term 'vanilla' but it has certainly been more mainstream in nature than the sex you and I have had."

"Okay. So... is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

Regina shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "I believe it's a good thing. I didn't plan for it to happen that way and I always plan things meticulously. Right from the first time we had sex it was clear that I couldn't control or predict your behaviour. That frightens me. But I think it's good for me too. However, that fear and the knowledge of how my relationships usually end has kept me from wanting to pursue our relationship further. However, despite my attempts to apply the brakes..."

"What we have seems to be storming full speed ahead anyway?"

"Yes, something like that. How do you feel about that?"

Emma considered her answer while taking a bite of her steak. She was terrified of saying the wrong thing and damaging this fragile frankness between them now.

"First of all, thanks for being open with me. I did actually realise that submissive wasn't something you normally did and honestly... it showed me another side of you. It showed me what you have under your thick layer of bitchy-ness and bossiness. Not that I don't like your bitchy side, I've actually grown to like it and even be... kinda turned on by it. Which is probably way kinky but never mind."

Regina gave a small smile and Emma realised it was the first time she had smiled since they arrived at the restaurant. *She must be as scared as me*, Emma thought and put even more thought into her next words.

"Secondly, I'm just as freaked out as you are. And I'm shit at relationships too. But as you pointed out... whatever is happening here doesn't seem to care about what our common sense is telling us. The truth is that I can't stop thinking about you and I think you know how I feel towards you. But we are both adults and have both been around the track a few times, we know that infatuation isn't everything. You have to be compatible too and it has to be the right timing. The question is... is this right or should we keep fighting it?"

Regina fidgeted again and couldn't look Emma in the eye. She looked stiff and uncomfortable. "I think we might be moving this discussion along a little too quickly here. This conversation was merely to probe our feelings and see if what we feel is more than physical attraction."

Crap, Emma thought. *She's pulling back. I went too far. This is like playing Jenga, the damn tower can fall at the tiniest wrong move.*

Emma breathed in slowly. "Well, now you've probed my feelings and clearly found more depth than you were comfortable with. What about yours?"

Regina took a quick sip of wine. "I obviously care about you."

"Care about me? As in 'I don't want you to get a horrible disease and die' or as in 'I have romantic feelings for you'?"

Regina once again avoided eye contact. "The latter."

Emma smiled from ear to ear and Regina caught it. "Don't look so happy, Emma. People I'm romantically entangled with usually end up hurt or miserable."

"I'll take my chances if I ever get offered the role. My heart is so covered in scar-tissue that it's hard to hurt and trust me, gorgeous, I wouldn't let you make me miserable."

"That's easy to say..." Regina began and trailed off meaningfully.

Emma swallowed down a bite of carrots and peas. "Well, I suppose I'll stop while I'm winning here. We both know we have feelings for each other, deciding whether or not we will act on them can be a later issue."

Regina looked surprised. "That is very generous of you. I realise that you have... given me much more than I have given you in this relationship so far and I know that most people wouldn't be this patient with me. Thank you."

"No problem. If something is going to happen between us, I want us to both be comfortable with it. We're two very tricky women and anything we get into will be tricky too. I wanna get it right."

Regina's mouth shaped into a shy smile. "I appreciate that."

They finished their food in comfortable silence and when the waitress came to take their plates and asked if they wanted dessert, Regina immediately said no and asked for the bill. Emma looked at her with disappointment clear on her beautiful features.

"Don't look at me like that, Miss Swan. You'll get your sweet treat. It just won't be here."

Emma gave a knowing grin and Regina laughed. "I didn't mean me. But thank you for the compliment. I'm... going to take you where I go every Sunday."

"Really?"

"Really. You've earned it and I believe I can trust you with the secret. We can go as soon as we've paid. I know the owner and that he keeps his shop opened all hours."

Emma raised her eyebrows. "So it's a shop."

"Oh, don't pretend you didn't see the card in my pocket that day you stalked me. You know where we are going."

"I did spot the card, yeah. Mainly because it's a weird thing for an off licence to have."

Regina rolled her eyes. "Yes. I was encouraging the owners to be a little more business-savvy and do some marketing and they decided that the best way to go about it was to get business cards with a loyalty scheme involving stamps on the other side. I'll show you when we get there."

The waitress brought the bill and Regina got her credit card out.

Emma took a sip of wine before asking, "hey, want me to pay this time?"

"No, not unless you want to?"

"I don't really care."

"Neither do I and I have more disposable income right now, so why don't I keep paying?"

"Okay, gorgeous," Emma said and finished her glass of red wine.

The waitress smiled at Emma while Regina put her pin into the card reader.

"It's so nice to see people dating and not caring about who pays. My boyfriend would have felt that I had way too much power over him if I always paid."

Emma smiled kindly at her. "As long as you respect each other, money is just money. One person having power over the other is more complex and has to do with underlying issues, not who picks up the tab or who makes more money."

The waitress smiled and nodded but Emma wasn't sure if she got the point she was trying to make.

"That's very insightful, dear. And very true," Regina added and handed the machine back to the waitress.

She was given the receipt and wished a good evening and then she and Emma left the restaurant to go out into the foggy evening.

Emma hurried up to Regina, who as usual was walking fast enough for her high-heeled boots to almost catch fire, and leaned in close.

"Thanks."

"Whatever for?"

"For not correcting the waitress when she thought we were dating."

Regina gave her an enigmatic smile over her shoulder and walked on. Emma stopped dead.

"Hang on... you mean... was that a date?"

Regina's deep, melodic laugh rang out in the cold evening air and Emma felt her smile come back in full force. She hurried to catch up to Regina and suppressed the strong urge to put her arm around the slightly shorter woman's shoulders.

Half an hour later they stopped at what Emma would have called a corner shop but what she knew was called a news agent and/or an off license here. The shop sold snacks, magazines, alcohol and a few bits of food and general household stuff. As they walked in she saw that this particular shop also had a small stand for homemade ice cream in the back. That was unusual for these places as far as Emma knew.

"They sell actual ice cream, in cones? In November?"

"Not just any ice cream, my favourite flavour of ice cream which is rare in these parts and that's what I allow myself two scoops of every Sunday afternoon."

Emma's brows knitted. "Ice cream is your secret ritual? What, are you on a strict diet or lactose intolerant or something? I mean it's just ice cream."

Regina looked painfully uncomfortable. The man that Regina had said hello to when they walked in replied for her.

"Not just any ice cream, Miss. Always *Bubblegum* ice cream. She is almost the only one who orders it, except for a few kids occasionally. But I'll always make it because Regina is the only person who is a regular customer and who tips!"

Emma's confused look changed into a smile and she giggled a little before she saw Regina's facial expression.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh. I just don't get why eating bubblegum ice cream has to be a secret? I mean, yeah... it's a bit kiddy perhaps, but a lot of grownups like food that kids enjoy."

Regina took a long breath. One that hitched halfway, as if it was hurting her airways. Then she replied.

"Pride."

Emma waited. There had to be more coming than just one word.

Regina looked up at the man by the ice cream counter. "May I please have two scoops of bubblegum ice cream in a cup?"

He nodded, clearly startled by the emotion in her voice and face. He quickly gave her the cup and when she held out the money and the loyalty card to be stamped he just waved it away.

"No need, this one is on me. Enjoy the ice cream and I will see you Sunday, yes? You can get two stamps then."

She nodded and gave a fake smile and the man hurried over to the till to give them some privacy. Regina began to leave the shop and Emma hurried after. When they were out the door Regina began to explain.

"When you spend your life, at least your childhood, being mocked.... you start to be very protective of your pride. Someone laughing at you or thinking you're silly or even worse, *pitying you*... it becomes abhorrent to you. My mother talked a lot about my weaknesses and she often laughed at my failures. It made me strong, but it also made me guarded. I keep a lot of secrets. Especially secrets which I believe I might be ridiculed or mocked for. Even if the mocking is just in jest and most people would just take it in their stride... it hurts me. Deeply."

There was a pause. Regina let her free hand rest on her stomach and tried to take deeper breaths before continuing. Emma saw the pain on Regina's face and realised just how hard it was for her to talk about this, and how ashamed and ridiculous Regina must feel. She vowed not to laugh again.

"I have been raised to always be dignified and refined. I have been raised to never make a move or have a thought which couldn't stand up to scrutiny. Doing something like this, going downtown to eat something so childish, uncouth and calorific... it is the sort of thing that my mother would have ridiculed until I stopped. And if I didn't stop on my own accord, she would have verbally abused me until I did. I went to therapy to deal with these issues when I was younger and I thought I had beaten my tendencies to let my upbringing steer my every action, but a few years later I realised I hadn't beaten it at all."

"What made you realise that?" Emma's voice was warm and concerned but not pitying. At least she hoped it wasn't, even she realised that pity would end this conversation right away.

"I got into a relationship with a woman who was elegant, intellectual, fascinating and beautiful." She signed. "And who treated me exactly like my mother did. Katherine laughed at me when I bought a garment she thought was unattractive and she would start fights with me when I didn't behave in a way which lived up to her standards. But the difference was that she rewarded me when I did things right, something my mother never had. So I stayed with her for far longer than I should. Even when I found out that she had cheated on me."

Emma wondered if she dared ask but decided to brave it. "What made you end the relationship?"

Regina gave a sad little chuckle. "Mary. We were all at David's birthday party and Katherine began to scold me for having too much wine, well in her opinion anyway, everyone else seemed to think I was fine. Mary spoke up and said that she didn't appreciate the tone Katherine took with me and well... Katherine lost her usual control and poise. She raised her voice at Mary and that was it. I lost it. I pushed her away and began shouting at her. I always did feel quite protective towards Mary and hearing someone sniping at her so cruelly, I couldn't take it. I didn't stand up for myself, but I stood up for Mary. And Katherine..." Regina chuckled mirthlessly and then sniffed quietly.

"Well, Katherine left me. She said she was disgusted by my behaviour. She also pointed out that I was hell to live with; boring and cruel. She said I had made her miserable and that my ex had told her that he had felt the same before I broke up with him. I didn't disagree or stop her. She just packed her things and left our flat. I heard she's married to some rich fashionista in Paris now."

Emma saw the tears in Regina's eyes and didn't know what to say, so she just took the spoon from Regina and dipped it into the by now melted bubblegum ice cream and licked it clean.

"You know what, gorgeous? This is actually kinda good. I mean it's totally artificial but I come from the country where we have Blue Raspberry flavoured stuff; artificial isn't a problem for me."

Regina laughed through her tears. She threw the cup of melted ice cream in the nearest bin.

"To be quite honest with you, dear, I am 99 % sure that bubblegum ice cream is an American invention."

Emma shrugged and savoured the sweet aftertaste of the blue ice cream. "I bet it is, we know how to make something taste nice."

"Emma?"

"Yeah?"

"Could you come home with me? I mean to spend time with me, not necessarily to talk about the case or... you know... have intercourse."

"Sure. I'd love some non-case-or-intercourse time with you!"

Regina smiled and it looked truly heartfelt. She bumped Emma's shoulder with her own in mock-reproach and then they walked on towards the tube in silence.

The extraordinary Miss Swan

Chapter Notes

Author's note: For those of you reading this fic only for the suspense and mystery and not the romance/smut – we will get back to the books and the men hunting them in the next chapter. There just has to be some more relationship development right now. :) Thanks for reading and reviewing!

"Would you like some wine?"

Emma sat down on the sofa as she considered Regina's offer.

"Um, yeah thanks."

"White or red?"

"Considering we both had red with dinner I guess we should stick with that?"

"Probably best," Regina said with a shy smile.

She went to the kitchen to fetch a bottle and two glasses. Emma could smell the scent of Regina's perfume coming off the headrest of the sofa and a tingle went down her spine to buzz in her stomach. She could enjoy lots of that scent now. She might even be able to lean in and sniff the source herself. As long as Regina didn't still seem upset of course, the last thing Emma wanted was to take advantage of Regina's current vulnerability and openness.

Suddenly Regina was back and Emma was once more stunned by the beauty of the woman in front of her. Regina was wearing a burgundy dress with a charcoal-grey suit jacket today, it was appropriate as workwear, if somewhat formal, but had also fit right in at the restaurant. Now that Regina had taken off the jacket, the dress seemed almost racy but Emma assumed that this was mainly due to the nature of her own gaze changing. But the dress was undoubtedly tight and complimented Regina's every curve.

The olive skin displayed at her bare arms, shoulders, slight cleavage and neck seemed to call to Emma and for a second the private detective found herself wishing that Regina wasn't wearing stockings so she could spy the naked skin of her lithe legs too. This felt a little too objectifying and she looked away immediately.

Regina was left standing there with the glass outstretched towards Emma and her darkly lip-sticked mouth lost in a smirk. She certainly didn't look shy anymore.

"Miss Swan... is that a blush I see under those divine cheekbones of yours?"

Emma had to smile at the compliment as well as the flirty tone in Regina's husky voice.

"Maybe. That dress seems to be doing things to me."

Regina's smirk was suddenly accompanied by the eyebrow quirk that Emma had grown to love so much.

"Are you certain it is the dress and not the woman in it?"

Emma's looked up at her with a smirk of her own. Flirty banter always made her feel more at ease. This was a game she was good at.

"The woman in it *can do things to me* any time she damn well likes."

"Noted. Now, do you want this wine or am I meant to stand here holding it all night?"

Emma accepted the glass and Regina took her own from the side table and sat down next to her. She had just sat down when her free hand was placed on Emma's thigh. It should have made Emma happy but strangely it made her jerk away.

Regina's brow furrowed. "I'm sorry."

"No! No, don't be. I really like you touching me. It's just... well, you were really emotional earlier and you asked me to come over without any... sexy times. I don't want to take advantage of you now or make you feel like you can't trust me to keep my hands off you."

Regina looked at her searchingly for a while and Emma's heart seemed to beat double time. She took a big gulp of her wine to settle her nerves and to have something to do.

Please don't take this the wrong way. Please don't pull back or start sniping at me, she thought to herself as she met Regina's chocolate brown eyes. After a while Regina finally spoke.

"That's very noble and thoughtful of you. And I don't believe it's an excuse to keep away from me."

"Oh hell no. It's really not, Regina. I promise you that. I want you so much that I think the crotch of my jeans might catch on fire, but it's been a weird day and as I said at dinner; I want to do this the right way. I want us both to be comfortable and sure. Even if it means I have to wait for those sexy, frickin' lips of yours."

Emma's eyes had dropped to the lips in question. Regina had obviously applied a new coat of lipstick when they got in from their trip over here as the plump lips shone perfectly in the light of the floor lamp next to them. The little scar above the top lip caught Emma's attention and without realising it, she was now staring at it slightly open-mouthed.

Regina gave a quiet little chuckle. "Well, waiting a little with sex doesn't mean you can't enjoy my lips."

She took a sip of her wine and Emma felt her breathing hitch as she saw the perfect lipstick mark on the wineglass. Emma *really* wanted that imprint smudged all over her body.

"Really? That would be okay? You wouldn't feel used, hurt or you know... regret it in the morning?"

Regina tilted her head to the side and gave a quiet scoff. "Dearest, I'm old enough to know what I will or will not regret. Kiss me in the next five seconds or I will simply kiss you."

Emma put her wineglass on the coffee table in haste and grabbed for Regina's glass so fast that she nearly spilled wine over both of them. Regina gave a quick little laugh and purred, "your eagerness always makes me smile."

Emma looked hungrily at her lips again. "Good, because your lips look even more frickin' amazing when you're smiling."

She lunged over and found herself immediately greeted by Regina's open embrace. She burrowed in and focused all her attention on the kiss. She could taste the wine in Regina's mouth and feel that for some reason; the brunette's tongue was warmer than her own. Their mouths kept locking together in different ways and Emma tried to figure out what kissing technique Regina liked best. She could get addicted to this and wanted to pull Regina right down with her into the addiction.

When Emma ran the tip of her tongue up and down over the little groove that made up Regina's scar, the brunette stopped her by putting her palms on Emma's chest and slowly pushing her away.

"Sorry, does that hurt," Emma asked breathlessly.

Regina gave a throaty, sexy little laugh. "No, but the skin there is sensitive for some reason and it turns me on more than I can say. It's sort

of my Achilles heel when it comes to kissing and sex."

"Great! Can I do it again then?"

"Emma! We are meant to just talk and *not* end up in bed, remember?"

"Fine. But then we have to stop kissing or I swear I'll lick that little slit the way I do your... um... more lower one."

"Look at you being more tasteful and careful with your words."

Emma grinned. "For some reason you don't strike me as the kind of woman I should say 'Pussy' to."

"You made me say much worse than that when we had sex the first time, remember?"

The tug in Emma's lower belly and the warm buzzing between her thighs told her that she not only remembered but so desperately wanted a repeat of that night right now. But this time on better terms.

"Yeah, I remember. I remember you looking amazingly sexy on your knees. I remember how angry you had made me and how wet you had made me too. I remember feeling weirdly used and horny as hell at the same time, actually"

Regina's smile faltered and she sat back a little. "I'm sorry I made you feel that way. That sounds awful."

Emma shrugged. "It's okay. It was very much worth it. And if we decide that it is all that we should do in the future; I'll happily take it. But now I'll feel more like your equal."

"Good, because you are so much more than just my equal. You are extraordinary, Emma Swan. You impress me astonish me and don't ever think otherwise."

Emma gave a shy smile. "Thank you. You're not so bad yourself."

Regina slapped her arm. "So, if we are to keep from tearing each other's clothes off. Which is probably good as I will admit to feeling a bit unsettled, what should we do?"

"This might sound weird to you as you don't watch TV, but do you wanna watch something? Enjoy our wine and maybe... snuggle up a bit?"

"Excuse me, are you suggesting we 'cuddle in front of the telly' as I believe they call it?"

"Oh, so you have heard of it? Awesome! In that case all we need is something on that screen over there and you sitting so I can get my arm around your shoulders."

Regina peered at her with an amused little smirk. "Let's compromise. Why don't I read something to you while sitting in your arms?"

"Read something to me? Like a bedtime story for kids?"

"Grownups can read to each other too, you know. You can stretch out horizontally on the sofa and I can sit between your legs with my back leaned on your front and read you a few chapters of one of my favourite books. You'll get a chance to get to know me a bit more through that and I can share something that is important to me with you?"

Emma thought about the arrangement and realised that having Regina in her arms like that made it a no-brainer, adding listening to Regina's hot voice with that sexy British accent and the chance to get to know Regina better... yeah, this was a great deal.

"Sold, Ms Mills. Go get your reading material and then rapport back to the sofa."

"Yes, Captain!" Regina gave a mock-salute and went over to her overstocked bookshelf.

She ran her finger over a few spines as she tried to decide what to read and Emma watched, amused that she felt jealous of the book spines being caressed.

"I'm not quite sure which of my favourites you would enjoy most."

"Anything, as long as it's not too slow and over-complicated. It's been a long day."

"Good point. Alright, how about 'Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea'?"

"I think I've heard of that."

Regina grabbed the book and walked over.

"You should have, it's a classic by Jules Verne. Right, we have the book, now make room."

Emma nimbly swung her legs up so she was sitting horizontally on the sofa. She spread her legs wide enough to make room for Regina and the brunette climbed into the hollow. She sat down between Emma's thighs and smiled a little at the sharp intake of breath as she nestled her rear against Emma's crotch. She leaned back and opened the book. It looked old and the spine creaked a bit as Regina opened it. Emma didn't know if it was the sound of the book or her own closeness but Regina gave an almost imperceptible happy sigh and began to read.

Emma put her arms around Regina and rested her hands on her lower stomach. She listened closely and tried to not be too distracted by Regina's supple body, warm and snug, against her own. She did however allow herself a sniff of Regina's hair and then her neck, something which her hostess clearly noticed but ignored with another enigmatic little smile.

They spent the next couple of hours like that until Regina started to become hoarse and Emma's bladder was too full to ignore. Then the reading stopped and they had another awkward, but on this occasion

strangely intimate, goodbye. And this time, Emma got that goodnight kiss and a whispered, "you really are extraordinary, Miss Swan."

The Locksley's and the nightmares

The Oldboys club was far too busy around lunchtime for the men of Non Omnis Moriar to meet there. Instead Carlos Llanza walked into the Science museum in South Kensington. He knew he would find Walter Darby and John Withers in the History of Medicine section.

He found the two men standing silently looking at a display case containing old amputation kits. This part of the museum was rarely busy due to some of the gruesome artefacts found there and to the larger popularity of the rest of the museum. It suited the three men well, not just because they only risked being disturbed by the occasional medical student or curious teenagers, but due to the nature of their cause. It was poignant to be reminded of the lengths people had gone to in the name of survival, This Unkindness of Ravens could revolutionise all that. And the power of that revolution would be in *their* hands.

"Well met, my friends."

Withers and Darby looked at Llanza with a questioning look at the greeting. After all, 'friends' was an overstatement in this callous business.

Darby finally nodded stiffly at him. "Good afternoon. What news do you have for us?"

"News of the bad variety, I'm afraid," Llanza lamented. "With the help of some generously compensated thugs, I tracked down Constable Locksley this morning."

Withers thick, grey eyebrows knitted. "Tracked him down? Surely you could just have gone to his residence or New Scotland Yard?"

"No I could not. Our dear friend Locksley, his little brat and his beautiful wife decided to leave Britain."

Darby took a step closer, alarm showing on his face. "But you caught him before he left?"

"Yes. It turns out that he quit his job in a hurry, telling his superiors that he suffered from a fatal disease and planned to spend his remaining days traveling. They bought it and speeded up his notice period so that he could leave quickly. It's amazing what sympathy can achieve."

Withers hummed pensively. "I assume he realised that his negligence of duty and the threat from our organisation made it unwise of him to stay in London. Leaving was a surprisingly sharp-minded decision for the rather dim Constable."

Llanza laughed. "That's because the decision was not his, but his wife's. She did most of the talking this morning, it seems that she is the brains in the family while the former-Constable is the heart."

"Yes, yes. Never mind all that, where are the books," Darby asked impatiently.

"Me and my men took the Locksley family to a hotel room near the airport. We interrogated them at gunpoint for about two hours and one thing became abundantly clear: they knew nothing beyond the point where Locksley handed the books over to Steel at the Barbican. After that the Constable returned to duty and that night he told his wife everything and she decided that they needed to leave for their safety and to preserve her husband's good name. They were flying abroad to move in with her family and start over."

Withers frowned. "So the books *were* in fact handed over, at least that is confirmed now. Are you certain that they were telling the truth?"

"John. If you had seen the fear in their eyes when we pointed a gun at their little curly-haired brat, you would have known that they would have told us everything we wanted to know."

Withers smiled a grin totally devoid of joy. "I see. How did you leave it with the Locksleys?"

Llanza shrugged. "I considered killing them to tie up loose ends, but her family are expecting them and anyway; I am certain that they will keep quiet out of fear. We have the address and contact details of Marian Locksley's relatives, she knows that if she or her darling Robin talks, her family will pay the price. And don't forget - to keep her husband's name clean and clear they need to keep the secret."

"Good. That is settled then," Withers said calmly.

"Good? How can you use that word right now? We have no idea who is in possession of the books," Darby hissed in panic.

Withers looked down at the display case. "No. But we will soon, I intend to go speak to the tourists who saw the accident. Surely one of them knows what happened to the books."

Emma had woken up with a headache that morning. That could have been down to the red wine she had last night but since it was only about two glasses, she doubted it. No, it had to be the damned nightmares. Her sleep had been plagued by the same nightmare reoccurring in different guises and it had wrecked her sleep.

Every time she woke with a start and wiped the sweat of her brow she soon feel asleep again just to end up in the same dream. Almost the same at least, the locations changed but the events didn't.

It began with ravens. Big, black ravens with glossy feathers. Like in the books, they overwhelmed her surroundings and landed on every surface she could see. The first time she was in a forest and the last time she was in an airport. She struggled to remember the locations in between. She remembered the first one because it was the longest of the dreams and gave her the scenario in full, vivid and gruesome slow motion. The ravens landed on every tree branch possible until the forest canopy was black with birds instead of green with leaves.

Emma felt her skin break out in a cold sweat. She was terrified in the dream but not sure why. It was more than just the ravens, something else

was wrong here too. She had to get away.

With the illogic nature of dreams, a man burst forth from behind the trees. Behind him was a car. It looked like a motorcycle at first but it was actually a car. In fact, it was her old car back when she lived in the states, a beat-up yellow Volkswagen bug. It was chasing him and he was screaming. First it was just a normal scream but then all the ravens joined in. His screams and their cawing changed from a cacophony of terrifying noises to a joined scream of her name. *EMMA* echoed from every beak and from the chased man's opened mouth.

He was as pale as snow and blood seemed to be pouring from his eyes, nose and mouth. He kept screaming her name in unison with the ravens, and continued to run towards her with the car after him. She was trying, but failing, to get to the man and pull him away from the approaching car. She seemed to be frozen in place.

He almost reached her just as the car ran him over and left the muddy ground red with blood. Then the car came for her and as she looked into it she could see that the driver was herself! The Emma in the car was grinning with bloodlust and looked deranged. She woke up just before the car hit her.

Next time the location would be different but the ravens would still be there and the man, chased by what first seemed to be a bike but turned out to be her car with her driving, kept repeating. The last time, in an empty airport, the ravens covered every seat in the gate area and the man and the car came through the wall. The man was run over, splattering his blood on the white airport walls and floor, and then the car headed for her and she woke up.

As the sun was up and her nerves too frayed to face falling asleep and possibly having the dream again; Emma got up. She had a long shower and a big breakfast chased down by some paracetamol. But still... the headache and the discomfort of the dream wouldn't leave her.

She helped out at the diner a bit, earning her meals by setting up in the kitchen and wiping down the tables before opening time. She

considered staying there and offering to waitress for free, she had to be distracted today, but she wanted to see Regina. She rushed over to Henry's Books as soon as it was open and found Regina helping an early bird customer.

Emma waited and looked over the shelves. To distract and calm herself she looked for a copy of the Jules Verne book that Regina had read from last night. The customer left without buying anything and Regina happily turned her attention to Emma.

"Good morning, Private Detective. Looking for anything in particular?"

Emma gave her a tired smile. She still felt like crap but it was easier to put up with now that she was with Regina.

"Yeah, I was looking for a book that a hot, nerdy chick bored me with last night."

Regina returned the smile as she walked over to Emma with her heels click-clacking on the floor. "She bored you? How awful. Is that why you look so drained today?"

Emma dropped the banter. She was just too happy to see Regina to carry on. "No, that had nothing to do with her. In fact, I find her more energising than coffee. No, I feel like shit because I had bad nightmares all night."

Regina looked closer and her smile faltered when she saw just how pale Emma was. "Oh Emma, I'm sorry. I often have nightmares myself, but from the looks of you, yours were quite the horror stories. Do you wish to talk about it?"

Emma shook her head quickly. "Not really. It was about the accident and... I guess, my guilt about it. Oh and the ravens from the book were there too. I just... wanna forget about it."

Regina took Emma's hand in hers. "Whatever you need. Just remember that the offer to listen and the offer to accompany you to the police to

tell your story still stands."

"Thank you. Actually, you know what might help?"

Regina's tone was warm and quiet. "No, dear. What?"

"A kiss."

Regina laughed. "You're incorrigible. What happened to us keeping to our arrangement?"

"I think the arrangement is kinda falling apart. I'm pretty sure that last night was neither banging or work."

Regina looked disgusted. "*Banging*? Is that what we do?"

"No, not lately," Emma deadpanned.

"Oh shush. Fine, we do go beyond the perimeters of the arrangement and I suppose a kiss won't hurt. Just don't propose marriage afterwards. We still have to decide what is going on between us."

"Propose? Don't flatter yourself, Mills."

Regina smiled and closed the distance between them. She took Emma's face in her hands and brought their mouths together in a kiss. It was warm and unbelievably welcoming and they both relished the feel of it.

The shop's phone rang and kept them from being locked in that kiss for most of the morning. Regina sighed and went to answer. Emma could hear her answering questions about when the shop was open and if they had any first editions. It was strange that she felt so unburdened suddenly. She hadn't told Regina about the dreams in detail and she hadn't talked through her fear and guilt and yet... she felt like all the bad stuff didn't matter so much.

She certainly felt safer and calmer. Maybe it was the warm comfort of the shop or maybe she was just in love and in the presence of the

woman she wanted to spend her days with. The latter was scary and she ignored it to instead take the chance to watch Regina.

The bookseller did not look happy about how the call was dragging on. She answered the question about the opening hours again and looked at Emma in frustration. Emma just grinned and gave her the thumbs up. Seeing Regina respond by holding up two fingers in the English 'Fuck you' sign made Emma laugh. It was funny how irritation could make Regina forget her manners.

When she finally ended the call she gave a long sigh and then looked up at Emma again.

"So, what will it be? Staying here to work in the shop or go to my flat to try and get some sleep and possibly go through my underwear?"

"Both options are totally tempting," Emma said. "Honestly though, you have more appeal to me than your panties do."

"Really?"

"Well, I am thinking a bit about the pair you're wearing right now but that's mainly because I miss what's inside them."

Regina looked like she was going to complain about the vulgarity of the topic but then she changed course and said, "perhaps you'll make use of their contents tonight?"

Emma felt warmth spread throughout her body. "Yes, please."

"Good, then I'm sure you will return the favor and let me have what's in those endless red knickers of yours. Now, enough of that. Please go fetch me the ladders in the backroom. We are going to get some books off the top shelf over there to put in the display."

"Yes, bossypants," Emma said with a smile. She didn't even realize how at home she was feeling in the shop and in Regina's company. All she knew was that everything was feeling a bit better now.

Desire and disappointment

Chapter Notes

Author's note: My updates are (as I'm sure you have noticed) pretty much daily now. That's because I have more time to write and I know that I won't in the near future. Thanks for still reviewing as much as you do. I know some readers only comment on a fic when they want an update and forget to do it when the fic updates frequently (really easy to do, I'm not judging.) However, I'm still an insecure writer and need to know that what I write makes sense and is being read by someone, so thanks! I know some people have requested more Rumbelle and others have wanted more SQ smut – this chapter will actually give you both.

Just as before when Emma had helped out in the bookshop, there were not enough tasks or customers to keep two people engaged throughout the day. This time Emma and Regina didn't resort to chatting though. There was far too much tension between them for that. Everything was changing and that was exciting but alarming. Too many things were unsaid and too many emotions warred inside them and so they figuratively danced around each other, too drawn to each other to keep neutral and too frightened of a possible relationship to dare to get close to one another.

As the morning moved onto lunch they decided to go to Granny's diner since it was close, quick and they both wanted a warm meal. It wasn't as foggy anymore but there were still traces of it and the bone-chilling cold clinging to the air. Regina agreed to try a chicken fillet burger and admitted that it was 'rather good' while Emma tucked into her usual cheeseburger.

When they had finished their meal, a solution to their uncomfortable situation popped up. Emma reached forward to move the ketchup bottle out of the way and when she scooped forwards her knee accidentally pushed between Regina's knees. It didn't go any further than that of course, there was too much table between them, but the mere act of a part of Emma spreading Regina's legs pinged both of their libidos into life. They looked up at each other and both saw eager eyes and lips that parted slightly.

It was a perfect outlet. Just as sex had let them blow off steam when they were infuriated with each other, flirting and foreplay turned out to be the way to disperse the awkwardness between them now.

They both smirked knowingly at each other and as soon as the bill was settled and they were back in the shop, another sort of dance ensued; this one was more physical. Throughout the afternoon, they would sneak touches whenever they could. The long time periods without customers they spent complimenting each other, reminiscing about what they had done in bed before and inappropriate touching; Regina's arm brushing roughly over Emma's breasts while reaching for a book on a shelf. Emma's hand snaking up Regina's leg when she crouched to pick up some coins which 'accidentally' fell out of her pocket.

They moved languidly around each other, showing off their attributes and body parts like peacocks. It was fun and it was maddeningly sexy.

It was 2.34 when Regina finally snapped and pushed Emma into the backroom. Emma had just leant in and whispered, "I have to admit... I want to fuck you until you ache from coming too much" and that had been the last straw for Regina. Emma now found herself pinned by the wrists against the wall and Regina's mouth smearing her lipstick all over her neck while kissing and biting. Emma groaned and fidgeted, wanting to get her hands free to grab Regina's sexy ass. The fidgeting revealed that her wetness was already seeping into her panties and it didn't surprise her. She wanted Regina so much she thought her brain might be overheating.

She whispered Regina's name and it sounded like begging. She used the fact that she was stronger than Regina and wrenched her wrists free. Soon her hands were on her lover, palming and grabbing soft round cheeks while trying to catch Regina's mouth with her own. The ensuing kisses were ferocious and at one point Emma even felt Regina bite her lower lip so hard she flinched.

Regina pulled up her dress to give her legs more room to move and then pushed her thigh up against Emma's sex. Emma couldn't help but moan out loud at the contact.

"Be quiet," Regina whispered.

"Make me," Emma replied with a grin.

"You bitch," Regina retorted, but her smile showed that Emma was being exactly what she wanted her to be.

She firmly moved her thigh back and forth, rubbing Emma's core through the blue jeans. She kissed Emma to keep her quiet and kept grinding with her thigh. In reply, Emma squeezed Regina's ass cheeks hard and tried to make her mouth show Regina how much she was enjoying this.

Emma wasn't the type to normally come from tribbing or toys, she usually wanted precisely placed fingers or a tongue, but now she found herself being close to coming merely from this. She assumed it was because no one had ever turned her on as much as Regina did. Even when she was infuriated with her, she still wanted Regina so damn much.

She let her hands moved over the perfect ass and up to the hips, she used her grip there to push Regina away.

"Jesus! Stop it or I won't be able to control myself. I might come or scream or something."

"Screaming might be an issue, but when it comes to coming... well that would just be a perfect afternoon treat for both of us. Now, get your

hands back on my arse and let me rub you into climax."

Emma groaned with pleasure. "God, I love it when you say 'arse'."

She did as she was told and returned her hands to their position. Regina's thigh followed suit and soon Emma felt the pressure on her crotch again. Regina's stockinged thigh was rubbing the seam of Emma's jeans onto her clit and Emma saw colors, not knowing if it was from the pleasure or because she was shutting her eyes so hard in her concentration to keep from moaning too loudly.

When she came she gripped Regina's ass so firmly that afterwards she was surprised that her short nails hadn't left marks in the fabric of Regina's dress. Regina kissed her to muffle the worst of the orgasm-noises and that meant only a few muted whimpers could be heard out into the currently empty shop.

Emma shivered in the afterglow of the climax and clung onto Regina who quickly put both feet on the ground and held Emma up. As soon as Emma had her breath under control and the shivering had stopped, she took a firm grip of Regina's shoulders and spun them both around.

"Your turn. Pull up your dress and face the wall."

Regina bit her lip. That struggle between refusing to take orders and loving being controlled by Emma warred in her for a millisecond and then she turned around with a purred, "now who's bossy?"

She tugged her dress up over her ass and exposed the top of her stay-up stockings and her light-grey silk panties to Emma. The panties had laced edges which lay beautifully against Regina's smooth, olive skin and Emma gave a moaning hum of appreciation. She let a finger caress the laced edge on either ass-cheek and watched Regina's skin develop goosebumps in the wake of her touch.

"Hurry up and take me, Miss Swan. If I have to go serve a customer while this aroused, you'll be in big trouble."

Emma smirked. "Say that again but use the word 'horny' and I'll give you a nice quick fuck right now."

Regina was panting slightly with arousal. "And if I don't wish to bend to your every filthy whim?"

"All I'm asking is for this one dirty word. But if you don't want to do it then you either have to touch yourself or spend the afternoon with your pussy wet and throbbing."

That wasn't true of course. Emma could not stand even another hour without the feel of Regina's exquisite sex and she was going to pleasure Regina no matter if she obeyed or not, but it was part of the game and she could see the effect of her words in Regina's breathing and hear it in the subdued moans she couldn't quite hide. They both loved this game and they both knew their parts.

Regina stiffened but a smirk played on her lips. "Fine. If it turns you on so much... Now what was it? Oh yes... Hurry up and take me, Miss Swan. If I have to go serve a customer while this *horny*, you'll be in big trouble

"The thing is, Regina. It turns YOU on so much and that's why I love it. I'll be your good girl if you're my bad girl. And bad girls talk dirty. Agreed?"

Feeling her pulse pound hard, Regina panted out the word, "agreed."

Then Emma yanked her panties down.

"Good. Then ask me to fuck you and I will."

Emma's voice sounded powerful and determined but her mind was mewling and begging for Regina's pussy around her fingers. She was so close to it and she wanted it so damn much.

Regina placed her open palms against the cold wall and lent her forehead against it too. She closed her eyes and felt her clit hardening

with every breath she took.

"Yes, Emma. Please fuck me hard and fast."

She didn't have to ask twice. The instant Emma put her fingers onto Regina's core and felt how drenched she was, she drove two fingers right into her entrance. Regina's body went rigid at the welcome intrusion but her pussy clenched softly against the fingers, drawing them deep inside herself. To Emma it felt like Regina's cunt was trying to suck her fingers and she felt a fresh wave of moisture soak her panties. She wondered if she was going to soak right through her jeans too before the afternoon was over.

"You're amazing Regina," she breathed reverently.

"So are you", Regina answered and turned her head enough that they could share a kiss.

The kiss changed the dynamic between them. The urgent need for sex seemed to simmer down and they once more felt the growing affection between them. Suddenly their eyes showed more than just hunger and the following kiss was soft and loving.

Emma stopped the kiss to nuzzle into Regina's hair and whisper, "you smell so good and you feel so good."

"And it feels so wonderful to have you inside me," Regina whispered back.

Then Emma looked at Regina's profile and saw her brow furrow. When Regina next spoke, her tone wasn't a tender whisper anymore. It was a hushed hissing.

"Oh for god's sake, try not to be so blasted sweet, Emma. Be rough! Fuck my brains out, damn you!"

Emma thought that through. Regina had a point, they were turning mushy and they neither had time for that or where in a position in their

relationship to indulge in it. Besides, Emma wanted their usual rough games too. Why was suddenly all she felt sappy adoration? She needed to be forceful and dominant.

Her features set into firm determination. "Fine. But to get back to that I think you'll have to piss me off."

"Pardon?"

"Annoy me! Come on, you're an expert at it."

"Miss Swan, if you think I'm going to let you dictate my actions then your uncouth American worldview has shown you far too much incorrect information about how Americans rule the world..."

"Stop, that did the trick, you pompous euro-trash. Spread wider and shut up!"

A smile was just barely hidden on Regina's lips as she took as wide a stance as her panties would allow and then felt Emma's fingers began to pound into her.

Emma kept kissing her neck and biting her shoulder through the fabric of her dress as she thrust into her with two fingers from behind and rubbed her clit from the front with her free hand.

Just as Regina was about to come she heard the bell above the door ringing out and informing them that a customer had entered the shop. Regina froze but Emma put her hand over Regina's mouth and whispered, "I think it's too late to stop. Let me finish you off and then you can go out. Nod for yes and shake your head if you want me to stop."

Regina thought about it for a millisecond. She could hear the shuffling steps of the customer outside and knew that she should do the sensible and well-mannered thing and go out there after having cleaned up a bit.

But oh... Emma was holding her tight and she felt so good and the bonds that tethered Regina to convention seemed so weak in comparison to the strong, soft hand covering her mouth. She wanted to come and she had deserved it, god damn it! Without any further hesitation she nodded firmly.

Emma gave her a kiss on the top of her ear and then began to fuck her again. She still had her left hand over Regina's mouth, it had been the hand which was rubbing her clit. Now only Emma's right hand was in action but she used it well by letting her thumb rub at Regina's clit while her fingers still penetrated her over and over again. It wasn't as efficient as the two-hand approach but right now Regina could have come from Emma just blowing hot air on her twitching pussy.

Regina could feel her eyes wanting to roll back in her head. This was so filthy and so good. She knew that her sex was gushing out its juices even faster now that someone was close enough to expose her submission to the sexy woman behind her. She could only pray that the customer couldn't hear what she and Emma could; the wet sounds of her pussy as it was fucked relentlessly.

The orgasm was close and Regina urged herself to remember all those evenings when her teenage-self had masturbated in her bedroom with the thin wall separating her and her parents. She had become very good at coming silently then and she hoped she could still do it.

She could. With violent spasms she came on Emma's still pumping hand. She was absolutely quiet against Emma's hand over her mouth and felt endlessly safe wedged between the wall and Emma's warm body.

Emma continued fucking her as she came, but in a slower and gentler way, and this meant that the orgasm lasted longer than it had any right to. When she had finished she used her hands to tap Emma's hips to tell her to move away and Emma understood and obeyed. She looked worriedly at Regina and whispered, "want me to handle the customer?"

Regina shook her head and cleared her throat. She called out into the shop, "Welcome to Henry's Books. I'll be right with you."

"Alright, thanks," a man's lacklustre voice replied.

Regina hurried to the sink with faltering legs. Emma took her arm to steady her and helped her over. Regina turned on the tap and got some kitchen roll. She wet it and used it to wipe her still pulsating sex. Then she pulled her panties back up and went to her handbag which was on the table. She quickly powdered her nose and brow and sprayed some perfume on her pulse points.

Then she took a deep breath and went out to the shop. She was completely calm and collected with the customer and in the end helped him pick out a book for his father. Emma watched and was stunned by Regina's ability to conceal and soldier on.

That woman is amazing, Emma thought. She licked her drying fingers clean and found herself longing for Regina's return like a lovesick puppy. *Damn Swan, you really have it bad,* she thought as she watched Regina with a blissed-out smile and lipstick marks all over her neck.

It was later that evening as Rupert Gold sighed and let his hand slide down one of the thick pages of *This Unkindness of Ravens* Volume 4. Around him were piles of papers with jumbled letters and mathematical formulas where he had tried every code pattern he could find in books and online. All to no avail. The contents in the books seemed to truly just be ramblings of a madman.

He slowly closed the book. "I still can't see any patterns. But there is something about these books."

Belle came over to kiss the top of his head and sit down in his lap. "There is something about *all* books. They're the treasures of the world."

He chuckled. "Yes, I know. But there is something unique about these ones. They feel... almost warm to the touch when you handle the pages a lot. Like they are reacting to you. And they have a special scent. Here smell a page."

He opened the book again and Belle sniffed it. "Yes, that does smell different than most books. Cheap glue or perhaps bad printing paper?"

Rupert frowned at the page before him. "No, I don't think that's it. These are not normal books but I cannot detect what exactly it is that is off about them."

"Well, if you're sure you can't do anything more then you'll have to let Regina know and then send the books over to Archibald. Maybe he'll have more luck?"

He nodded slowly and then chuckled again. "You know, you make even the name Archibald sound musical."

"That's just the Australian accent, sweetheart."

"No, it's your voice. It's everything about you," he said smiling while he put his arms around her and held her closer to him.

She laughed. "Look at you being all adorable. Do you need a favour or something?"

"I have everything I need right here. However, I *do* wish I could be of more help to Miss Mills. Having Neal man the shop so I could spend every waking second with these books clearly wasn't enough. I wasn't enough."

"Are you most upset that you couldn't help Regina or because you couldn't crack the mystery?"

He tilted his head and sent his hair bouncing as he looked up at her. "I'm going to say... 50/50."

She laughed. "Well, as I say, maybe Archie will have better luck and then it will be because you recommended him. Now call Regina right away and then I want your full attention, I haven't had you to myself for days and I want to snuggle up on the sofa and play chess."

"Dearest, I think I might be too tired for chess tonight."

"Really? What if it's strip chess? For every piece lost you have to lose a garment?"

Gold grinned mischievously. "You've got yourself a chess game, my angel. Let me just ring Miss Mills and then I'll be in."

She jumped off his lap and headed out of the room. "Alright, I'll go find the chess set. You keep it in the closet in the hall, right?"

"That's right," Rupert called over his shoulder. Then he picked up the phone and dialled the number on the business card that Regina Mills had given him. It rang for quite a while and when a voice answered it sounded a little strained.

"Regina Mills speaking."

"Oh hello Miss Mills, this is Rupert Gold. Is this a bad time?"

"No, no not at all."

"Good. I'm afraid I'm not ringing with good news. I have spent every waking moment dissected the sentences of that book and I can't find anything. I even turned to the world of the arcane to see if there were any spells or incantations hidden in the text but no luck. I'm going to have to give up and send the books to Archibald Hopper to have a look."

There was silence on the line. "I see. Thank you for trying. Hopefully Mr Hopper will have more luck. Thank you for keeping me up to date and for putting so much energy into this project."

"Think nothing of it. If you want, I can try to find an expert on codes while Archie has the books? That way, if he doesn't find anything either we will have a plan B. After all, I am just a layman when it comes to this and I might have missed something."

"I couldn't possibly ask you for more of your time."

"Honestly, Miss Mills, it would be a great help to me. I don't like unsolved mysteries and if this one gets left unresolved I won't be able to sleep properly."

"Alright, if you are certain that you don't mind?"

"Not at all. I will reach out to my contacts just as soon as I have handed the books over to Archie."

"Thank you so much and have a good evening."

"The same to you. And please send my regards to Miss Swan when you see her."

"I will, send my best to Belle."

"Of course. Goodbye."

"Goodbye Mr Gold."

Rupert went into the adjoining room to find Belle on the sofa with the readied chessboard on the table. He smiled warmly at her and sat down to play.

Regina put her hand over her eyes. She had really hoped that Gold would have the answers.

"Hey, you ok?"

Emma punctuated the question by caressing Regina's naked shoulder. Regina turned around in the bed and faced the woman who was laying naked next to her. They had just wound down from another bout of lovemaking when Gold had rung.

"Did you hear the conversation?"

"Yeah, I heard enough to get it. He sent his regards to me, clearly not knowing I was in your bed, there was no luck with the text and the books are now going to the next expert."

"Exactly. I have to admit to being disappointed. I really hoped this would be resolved quickly. After all, we might still be in danger."

"Hey, don't stress yourself out. Maybe he got frustrated and gave up too fast or maybe this Hopper guy will find the solution. We'll get to the bottom of this, I promise. I never give up and neither do you, we'll find the answers through pure stubbornness."

Regina laughed. "I prefer to call it determination and tenacity"

"And I prefer that silver tongue of yours inside me."

"Really? You haven't had enough?"

Emma chuckled. "Well, I wasn't asking you to let me queen you again, I just wanted a kiss."

"Then I suggest you come here and take what you want."

Emma did and the kiss was sweet and slow, filled with warmth and satisfaction.

When it ended, Emma broke away to ask, "I probably shouldn't stay the night, huh?"

"Not unless we are ready to give up our deal of going slow and thinking this through, no. I believe you sleeping in my bed would be a point of no return - romance wise."

Emma laughed. "Thank goodness that you are an expert on everything!"

"That's what you get from an Oxford education, dear," Regina said with a smirk.

They kissed again and then Emma started collecting the clothes they had thrown all over the place when they finally walked through that door after closing the shop and taking a black cab to Regina's flat. When she was dressed she came by for a last kiss.

"Don't get up. I can see myself out. See you tomorrow?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can find something for you to dust and polish in the shop."

Emma scoffed. "As long as I get to polish those perfect tits afterwards."

"I will make no promises as long as you keep being so vulgar."

Emma's pink lips broke into that smile which always took Regina's breath away.

"Uh-huh. We both know that you love it. See you tomorrow, gorgeous."

"See you tomorrow, Emma. Goodnight."

Fear

Chapter Notes

Author's note: I cannot thank you enough for all the wonderful comments/reviews! I will get around to replying to all of them, I'm just prioritising writing right now. As always, you can connect with me or stalk me for updates on: Tumblr where I am Violetscentedwriter or Twitter where I am VioletscentedSQ or on Facebook where I'm Violet Scented.

She was running, but it wasn't like when she usually ran. This was really hard work and she had to fight to move forwards. She was in some kind of warehouse with big brown boxes everywhere and all the isles she ran down looked the same. How was she ever going to get out of here? Nothing was chasing her as far as she could tell, but she somehow knew that this was a bad place to be. She needed to leave.

Something brushed through her hair and scraped at her head. It turned out to be a bird. No, a raven to be more exact. Of course it would be a damn raven! Emma took a deep breath and tried to speed up, but no matter how much effort she put into it – she barely moved forward. Her muscles ached from the effort and she could feel that the claws of the raven had scratched her scalp pretty bad.

Another swoop of wings and another set of claws rasping along the top of her head. She swiped at the bird, but the only effect of that was that the raven bit her hand with its razor-sharp beak. Emma had always liked ravens, crows and other big black birds but now she found herself hating them. And even worse, fearing them.

The raven finally flew off but Emma could feel the cuts on her head hurting like hell and the bite on her hand was bleeding. She screamed in frustration, why couldn't she run properly? She needed to get out of here, she didn't know why but she was certain that she had to hurry away.

She looked around in panic once more and was again faced with row after row of shelves with boxes, all looking the same. Where was she? This looked a bit like the first place she ever worked as teenager, but there she had been safe and able to move properly. And there sure as hell hadn't been a bunch of aggressive frickin' birds flying around.

A few drops of blood trickled down from the cuts on her scalp and mixed with the sweat on her forehead. Soon it would drip into her eyes so she couldn't see.

Suddenly she spotted a man in the distance. She called out to him for help. Maybe he could tell her why she couldn't move normally or at least where she was and how she'd get out.

The man made no sign of having heard or seen her and Emma tried again.

"Hey! Help me! Where's the exit?"

He finally turned to look at her and that was when Emma realised who the man was. It was the old guy who had been killed on the road.

"I don't give directions to killers," he hissed.

Now Emma saw that he had blood pouring from the back of his head, exactly where he had hit the tarmac. Emma tried to stop. She couldn't get closer to him. He was evil. He was dead. She heard the cawing of one of the ravens and then...

...then she woke up with a start. She stared around her dark, little bedroom but she was alone. No dead guy, no ravens, no warehouse. It was definitely another of those nightmares. She might not be dealing

with the effects of the accident and her guilt over it when she was awake, but her subconscious was making up for that. If this continued she'd have to get counselling or something.

She sat up and drank some water from the sports bottle on the make-shift nightstand, which was actually her hard-shell suitcase. She took a few deep breaths and tried to convince herself that it wouldn't be like last night, she wouldn't go to sleep and go right back into the nightmare. But she didn't believe herself. Could she deal with another night like that? Reliving the accident in the scariest ways with those damn horror-ravens everywhere?

Her heart was still pounding. There was only one thing she could think of to soothe herself; Regina. Would she be livid if Emma called her now? Emma checked the time, it was 00.47. That wasn't too late, right?

She chewed her lip as she considered it. She rarely got scared but now she was freaking out from something as silly as nightmares. She comforted herself with that they were nightmares based on a real-life trauma and then picked up her phone. If Regina truly cared about her, surely she'd want to help.

The phone only rang for about three signals before it was answered.

"Emma? Is that you?"

"Yeah. Sorry to bother you so late."

They were both quiet for a couple of seconds.

"That's alright, I'm a light sleeper anyway. Look, Emma, if you are hoping for an encore, I'm rather tired."

"What? No, no... this isn't a booty call. It's something else. I, um, had those nightmares again."

"The same ones that kept terrorising you last night?"

"Yeah, a bit different but still about my guilt about the accident. I know, I know... you think I should tell the cops. I don't think that'll help though. I think I just need to deal with it naturally. But that'll take time and right now I need to sleep."

"I see. Are you asking me for sleeping pills? I do have a few but I'm not sure if they are in date anymore."

Emma rubbed her forehead. How was she going to ask for this?

"No, not pills. I think I need company. Well, no, I think I need YOUR company."

The line went silent for a while.

"Alright. Would you like to come over right away?"

Emma felt a wave of relief at those words.

"Great! I mean, um, when you say 'come over'... do you mean to..."

"Well yes, we can have sex if you like. If you think it would help. Or we could just talk."

"Or... perhaps I could sleep next to you?"

Silence. Emma waited and then she spoke again.

"Look, I know we said we wouldn't cross that line and normally I'd stick to that but I'm not asking because I want to be your girlfriend, I'm asking because I'm fucking scared to close my eyes and see that guy die again. And again. And again. And constantly feel like it's my fault."

More silence.

"Okay, Emma. Come over and we can talk and then you can sleep next to me."

"Really? You sure I'm not gonna ruin your night? You have to be up early to run the shop."

"I don't sleep much anyway so that shouldn't be a problem."

"Thanks a million, Regina! I'm coming over. Just... don't get dressed, please. I'm gonna look like shit when my taxi arrives and I don't want to see you all dolled up and perfect."

"Miss Swan, I can promise you rumpled pyjamas and sleep-tousled hair."

"Perfect. I'll call a cab."

"It won't be cheap, not over half of London and especially not this late."

"I know. It'll be worth it."

"Alright. I'll see you soon then, Emma."

When Emma rang the doorbell she found out that Regina had been true to her word. The woman who met her wasn't the normally so styled and elegant lady. It was an adorable woman who looked five years younger without make-up and who stood there in her slightly wrinkled silk pyjamas, hair that was hanging flat against her face and a shy smile.

Emma tried to play it cool but she failed. She ran straight into Regina's arms and held her so tight that Regina had to breathlessly ask her not to squeeze all the air out of her lungs. Emma lessened the grip but still kept Regina close. The door slowly slid close behind them with a thud and Regina stroked Emma's hair.

"Are you okay, dearest?"

I've been promoted from the general 'dear' to 'dearest', that's gotta be a win, Emma thought to herself as she burrowed her face into Regina's

neck and smelled her Guerlain perfume. She didn't know how to reply to the question.

They stood like that for a little while, the only sounds being heard were their breathing and the soft rustling of Regina's hand caressing Emma's hair.

"Sorry, I'm being pathetic. Yeah, I'm okay. I mean, there is a taxi driver in London who thinks I travel around London all night looking like the living dead but other than that... I'm doing good."

"You're shivering. I don't think you are doing as well as you pretend, I doubt you would have come all this way otherwise."

Emma tried to think up a jokey reply but nothing came to her. She just squeezed her eyes shut and nestled into Regina even more. Instead, Regina continued speaking.

"And you're not pathetic. You're shaken up and you're tired. Let's skip talking and go straight to bed, I think what you mainly need right now is somewhere safe to sleep."

"And is that with you?"

"Why certainly! I scare away grown men, I can absolutely chase off some nightmares."

Emma laughed but it sounded hollow. Regina gently kissed her hair.

"You must be shattered. Let's go to bed, dearest."

She merely nodded in reply and when Regina walked off, Emma let her pull her along by the hand. When they were in the bedroom, Regina helped Emma take her boots off and then her sweater and her jeans. Now Emma was in a long-sleeved t-shirt, panties and socks. She was glad she hadn't worn a bra because she was too tired to take that off and then put the t-shirt back on. She felt exhausted and a little like a kid again.

Regina pulled away the covers on the side closest to them and patted the bed softly. Emma dutifully got in and Regina tucked her in before walking around to the other side of the bed and getting in at her end.

Emma found her side of the bed a bit cold and shivered again. Regina noticed and ran a warm hand over Emma's cheek.

"Sorry, I tend to keep the temperature rather low when I sleep, otherwise I just lay awake because of the heat."

"That's okay. I'll warm up soon."

"Good," Regina said with a faint smile. She looked worried and Emma wondered just how bad she must look or seem.

"Well then... unless there is anything else you need before sleep, I'll say goodnight."

Emma's voice sounded small when she replied, "no, I'm good. Night, Regina."

Regina turned out the light and they both got comfortable. Emma had enough time to bury her face in the pillow and see if it smelled like Regina when she shivered again.

Regina cleared her throat softly and then mumbled, "turn around."

Emma was too tired to question the demand. She did briefly think that she wasn't in the mood for sex but then realised that she was pretty sure that Regina wasn't planning on groping her. She turned around, and very slowly and very carefully Regina wrapped herself around her until she was spooning her. Emma felt like she could have cried with gratitude, but that was probably the frayed nerves and tiredness talking.

She just mumbled, "thanks."

"Don't thank me, Miss Swan. I just didn't want the bed shaking whenever you shivered."

Emma grinned at the obvious lie and felt Regina move a little closer and cradle her tighter. Sleep came quick for Emma, and this time, the nightmares stayed away in fear of Regina Mills.

When morning came around, Regina woke to a smell of something sweet cooking and a bed that was empty. She sat up with a confused frown.

"Emma?"

Emma appeared from the kitchen, wearing the clothes from last night and with her hair in a messy braid.

"Hey sleeping beauty. I'm here. Sorry, I snuck up to make you breakfast."

"You made breakfast? I thought you said you couldn't cook?"

"I can't, but if there is one thing I've learned living at Granny's, it's making American pancakes. I hope you like pancakes?"

Regina smiled. "I haven't had American pancakes since I was in New York many years ago. I'd love to have yours."

"I'm gonna be a grownup and skip making jokes about you already *having had mine yesterday* and go flip the pancake. Wanna join me and put some coffee on when you are ready?"

"Yes, of course. There should be some orange juice in the fridge too. Oh and there is honey and a jar of quince jam in the cupboard for the pancakes. I'm afraid I don't have anything syrup-y."

"Quince jam? What the hell is that? Jeez, what's wrong with strawberry or blueberry?"

Emma shook her head and headed back to the kitchen. Regina smiled after her while she stretched in the bed. She decided to nip into the bathroom and then go make the coffee. With a startled jolt she realised that this situation felt extremely comfortable. She decided to stop her

brain from questioning how long it could last before she'd mess it up.
She had coffee to make and pancakes to enjoy.

New paths to take

John Withers was sitting on a bench in a tucked away, small communal area behind the busy Hatton Garden.

He was tightening his thick grey scarf as Walter Darby walked towards him. Darby sat down next to Withers without a word, placing his briefcase by his feet and brushing off the tip of his high-polished shoes.

A couple of minutes passed until a man smoking a thin cigarette appeared. The two men on the bench looked up at Llanza and merely nodded in greeting, a gesture he returned stiffly.

Without any preamble, Withers led them into today's topic of conversation.

"I have spoken to a few of the tourists who were witnesses to Steel's unfortunate demise. I informed them that I was a forensics expert called in by the Met and asked several questions about the scene. It appears I was believable as they were all very forthcoming. After a tedious amount of time I found one Asian young man who informed me that he saw a blonde woman hurry away with a bag in her hand."

"Do you believe this is who stole the tote bag with the books," Llanza asked.

Withers hummed. "He said the woman looked frightened and he seemed sure that she was just another onlooker who in her panic dropped her bag, then picked it up and fled the disturbing scene. This could of course be true, we could be looking at a person with a tote bag who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Walter Darby faced Withers. "But you do not believe that's the case, do you?"

"No. None of the others mentioned seeing a fabric bag with the words Tate Modern on it in all the commotion. The only mention of such a bag is in the hands of this mysterious blonde fleeing the scene. She must be our next target."

Llanza dropped his cigarette and stepped on it forcefully. "Do you want me to call Robin Locksley and ask him if he knows of any blondes with an interest in these books?"

Withers watched a passing car down by the road before answering. "Yes, that sounds like a good idea. Walter?"

The man next to him turned to face him while running his hand over his bald head as if to warm it. "Yes?"

"Can we rely on you to contact your sources on the black market to see if the books have resurfaced somewhere?"

"Yes, of course. I have asked my usual people to keep an eye out ever since the books were known to be here in London, but I will widen the net and perhaps offer a reward?"

Llanza nodded eagerly. "Good idea, flush these books out with rivers of coin."

Withers stood up. "All right, gentlemen. Let us reconvene when we know more, then. Good hunting to you both!"

Emma looked down at her ankles. "Nope, I'm sorry. These are too short as well. Maybe I should just go in my clothes from yesterday and rush into the diner to change before coming back to the shop?"

That had been Emma's idea all along. Regina however thought it would save time if Emma just borrowed some clean clothes from her and they could go straight into the shop and work. The problem was that all of

Regina's trousers were too short. There was a little less than an inch separating their heights but clearly, when it came to Regina's perfectly tailored trousers – that inch counted.

"No, this just means that you should go with my first suggestion: pick out one of my dresses. You said that you missed wearing dresses and jewellery, remember? Now is the perfect time to remedy that. I will let you borrow anything you wish and trust me... I do not lend my clothes to just anyone."

"Well, we've shared saliva, a bed and your strap-on in the last couple of weeks so I think we can share clothes too."

"Exactly, so hurry up and pick out a dress."

"This is why you won't let me travel in my dirty clothes and change later, isn't it? You want to see me in one of your skimpy dresses."

"That is not the entire truth. It's also because I don't want you to skive off by going to your room and changing right when we are busy opening the shop."

"*'We'* are busy opening the shop, it's your shop!"

"Which you are helping out in! Now, you like dresses and I will like you in *my* dresses. So just choose one while I grab you a pair of black stay-ups."

In all honesty Emma was intending to what Regina suggested all along, it was just fun to string her along and pick a fight. Nevertheless, there was a little niggling doubt at the back of Emma's mind, could she do justice to Regina's expensive and elegant dresses? Her own dresses, that she owned back before she slimmed down her wardrobe to simply what was easy to travel with, had been sexy but cheap. These ones looked like they cost an arm and a leg.

After a while of intense scowling at the dresses, she picked out a black V-necked shift dress with grey trim. She took off the fluffy towel, which

she had wrapped herself up in after a quick shower while Regina washed up the dishes from breakfast. Just as the towel hit the bed behind Emma, Regina walked in with a pair of stay-ups in her hand. She stared at Emma's naked body and the American gave a burlesque pose with an accompanying wink to her rap audience.

"Oh stop that, Emma, or we'll be late! Put the dress and stay-ups on. You're a size 5 in shoes too, aren't you?"

Emma looked confused. "Um, I think so but I can't remember British sizes. How the hell did you guess that?"

"I cast a glance at your shoes when I put them in the hall this morning. They are the same size as mine."

"Oh cool. Man, you notice everything, huh?"

"If you're asking if I spotted the three little stars tattooed on your hip, then yes," Regina said with a smirk. "Now hurry and get dressed while I get you a pair of heels. The grey Louboutin's I think. They'll match the grey in the trim of the dress."

Emma was putting on the stay-ups. "Yeah, sure. But Regina..."

Regina stopped and turned. "Yes?"

"What about underwear? I came here without a bra and only the panties I was wearing yesterday."

Regina looked at her for a second and then pointed towards the top of her dresser. Emma grinned happily and headed for the dresser to choose from Regina's underwear. As she walked over to it, she realised that Regina hadn't gone to the hallway to get those shoes. She was still staring at Emma, who was only wearing a pair of black stay-ups and a smile.

She laughed and Regina glared at her and stormed out to the shoe rack. Emma opened the top drawer. It was full of panties and they were all...

folded neatly. They were tucked into perfect little triangles on top of each other and Emma bit her lip not to giggle. She knew that ridicule was a sore spot for Regina so she decided not to say anything. She just picked out a pair of black, silky panties which were on top of one of the piles. She put them on and was happy to see that they fit despite Regina being curvier than she was down there.

Next came the adventure of finding a fitting bra. Once again, Regina had a little more cushioning but Emma guessed that her chest was ever so slightly wider due to broader shoulders and plenty of push-ups to build her pecs. She found a black padded bra which fitted okay and went with that. Just as she was doing the clasp up, Regina came back and deposited a pair of grey shoes by the bed.

"Wait a moment, let me help," Regina said and grabbed the bra clasp with one hand. The other hand quickly slid up Emma's back, making her start at the warm touch. Then both of Regina's hands were engaged in clasping the bra and Emma closed her eyes in the pleasure of the sensual domesticity they seemed to have stumbled into. She tried to remind herself not to get too used to this. Regina could buck at any moment or even worse, she could get too spooked herself and run away like she usually did.

Everything was so fragile between them. Although... it did seem a bit more solid after last night. There had certainly been a shift in Regina's behaviour, Emma realised. Regina was calmer and less guarded around her this morning. Man, how she hoped it would last.

It had taken longer than Regina had hoped but finally Emma had gotten dressed, borrowed some mascara and some BB cream, which luckily was vague enough in tone to work for both their skin tones, and thrown on Regina's second coat. They were on their way to the tube now and Regina was trying to remember how to act casual around a beautiful woman wearing her clothes. She hadn't had to do that for a long time

and honestly, it had never been this impossible before. No other lover had ever looked so good in her clothes or been so welcome in them.

Men seemed to stare at Emma Swan whether she was wearing a Gucci dress or baggy running clothes, so Regina wasn't surprised to notice that all the suit-clad men in the tube carriage kept throwing barely hidden glances at Emma. What did surprise her was that she wanted to rip all of their hearts out of their chests. Normally she guiltily liked being in the company of the most beautiful woman in the room, but now she almost wished that Emma was a little less radiant with her sparkling green eyes, high cheekbones, dazzling smile and those long tresses of blonde hair that she was currently braiding.

She shook off her jealousy and her objectifying of Emma. She wondered if it was Emma in more feminine clothes which was enticing her so painfully, but deep down she knew it wasn't. It was Emma in *HER* clothes. Suddenly she smirked devilishly to herself as she mulled that fact over. This goddess of a woman was wearing *her* clothes, had slept in *her* bed and was interested in *her*. None of these well-dressed men or women were here with Emma. She was. She placed a hand on Emma's leg and asked, "darling, do you want me to help you with that?"

Emma smiled bemusedly but nodded and turned so that Regina could continue braiding the damp hair and then tie it up with the hair-tie Emma had around her wrist. When she had finished, Regina moved the braid aside and tenderly kissed Emma's exposed neck. Such public affection wasn't really Regina's style, but right now it felt marvellous. Emma smiled happily at it too and Regina knew she had done the right thing. She also knew that everyone in the carriage was staring at them. She didn't care anymore.

She checked herself for doubts and fears at the intimacy between them, but when she took another look at Emma's affectionate and still smiling face, she realised that so far she was doing quite well. She hadn't messed anything up and hurt Emma for a long time now. Maybe she *could* do this?

They walked towards the shop while Regina fished her keys out of her handbag.

"Regina?"

"Yes?"

"Are you still in touch with your ex, that Katherine chick?"

"I'm connected to her on Facebook but that's it. Why do you ask?"

Emma bit her lip and avoided eye contact.

"On the way over here I was thinking... if she ever gets in touch with you or anything, would you let me have a talk with her?"

Regina's eyebrows shot up her forehead. "To achieve what? Asking questions about me?"

"No, chasing the bitch away like you did with my nightmares last night."

"Oh Emma. You don't need to return the favour. Nor do you need to protect me from Katherine, she can't hurt me anymore."

"It wasn't really to return the favour. I just wanted to smack some sense into the people who have hurt you in the past. Obviously your mom is villain number one, but as she's dead she is kinda off the hook. But everyone else... well, I'm going to need a list. And maybe a shotgun."

Regina laughed. "What you need is to mind your own business and keep yourself busy. I thought we'd do some inventory today as I have a handy little helper."

"Great," Emma groaned.

"Although, with you in that diminutive dress showing off those divine, long legs... I assume there will also be some other activities in the backroom again at some point."

Emma did a fist pump. "Yes, Swan scores again!"

Regina rolled her eyes. "*Swan* is hopeless and vulgar." She opened the door and held it open for Emma. "Get in there and turn the lights on."

"Yes boss," Emma said. As she slunk in through the open door she leaned in and gave Regina a quick, soft kiss on the lips.

Regina felt her heart do a somersault in her chest. Yes, maybe this could work. Maybe everything would be alright with the books and she and Emma had a future together. Maybe... she was just kidding herself?

Marco and Archie

The inventory process took longer than expected as they realised that Henry had not only forgotten to keep tabs on his books but also had duplicates in strange places and apparently hidden personal favourites, to 'read later', behind the books on the reserve shelf.

It was the third day of inventory when that last fact pushed Emma to offer her detective skills in finding the recipients for the unclaimed books. Regina agreed that they couldn't just keep taking up valuable space in the backroom with these books and gave Emma free reign to deal with it. So Emma spent hours with confusing post-its, half-written entries in Henry's old ledger and cryptic notes in the margins of the books themselves. It was hard work but it was fun in a way.

Around four in the afternoon Emma had enough of hanging out in the cramped, stuffy backroom and walked into the shop to stretch her legs. She saw Regina standing by a shelf and speaking to an elderly man with a white goatee and what sounded like an Italian accent. They were both smiling and the man was patting Regina's upper arm.

"I must be going, cara mia. I am meeting a lovely lady for afternoon tea and I do not want to be late."

"Of course, Signore Galletti. Oh... sorry, old habits really do die hard, I mean *Marco*. I trust you'll have a lovely time."

Just then Regina spotted Emma.

"Emma. This is an old friend of my father's. Remember when I told you about the man who built most of the shelves in this shop? That was Marco here."

Marco beamed at Emma and extended a hand. Emma smiled back, wiped the book dust which covered her hands off on her jeans and then

shook his hand.

"Very nice to meet you, Marco. Having climbed up and down these shelves while looking for books for her ladyship here, I have been grateful for their sturdiness."

He laughed. "I am glad to hear it! I'm also glad that Regina is getting some help, I did not know the earnings of the shop were high enough for her to employ an assistant though?"

"Oh I'm not an assistant, I'm just the lucky person who gets to climb bookshelves all day because I date a bookseller!"

Emma didn't realise what she had said until Marco's face lit up in a happy grin and he clapped his hands while turning back to Regina.

"Cara mia, are you trying your hand at love again? That is splendid news! Henry would be so happy to hear that."

Regina smiled a little stiffly and he chuckled.

"I know, you have inherited your mother's English-ly reserved ways when it comes to your private life. I will say no more and leave you two to your romance and go see about my own over some tea with the lovely Phyllis Willesden. Nice to meet you, Emma. Look after our Regina."

"I will," Emma said quietly. She was desperate for him not to leave but couldn't think of a way to make him stay. She knew that as soon as he had left she'd have to face Regina and she could already feel the tension and anger coming off of her.

The doorbell chimed as the door closed and Regina immediately turned to Emma.

"Why on earth did you just tell a man who has been like an uncle to me that we are having sex?"

"Regina. I didn't say that at all. I probably shouldn't have said that we were dating because we haven't really determined what it is we are

doing... but I mean, come on. We are clearly dating."

"Well... I... That is not the issue here. The issue is why you had to broadcast it to the first person you have met that knows me?"

"He's not the first, I've met Mary quite a few times."

"That is not the point." Regina spat out the words.

Emma held up her hands in apology. "No, you're right. I'm sorry, I said too much. It was a mistake."

"Yes, it certainly was." Regina turned to look out the window with what looked like a disgusted grimace.

Emma crossed her arms over her chest. Her contrition was fading into annoyance.

"Fine. I'm sorry. Just don't act like dating me is like being diagnosed with the plague. So what if people find out? We are pretty much dating, maybe even *more* than dating.

Regina's head snapped towards Emma and when she spoke her voice was low and menacing.

"We are not dating and we are not going to be in a relationship, Miss Swan. Because either you or I will ruin this long before it gets to that point. That is obvious."

Emma nearly gasped. "Do you know what you are doing? Your fear of ruining this is what is actually ruining it! Jesus, Regina. You are just stalling because you're scared, god knows I know the feeling. I have run away from every important relationship in my life and I know what it looks like to get cold feet. But just... don't! Just let me frickin' love you!"

Regina stopped with her mouth slightly open and her eyes faintly glazed. They stared at each other and time ticked by slowly and painfully.

Suddenly Regina drew in a deep breath. It sounded desperate, as if she had been holding her breath for quite a long time. She took two steps towards Emma and grabbed her hand firmly. The grip was so tight that it hurt a bit but Emma didn't flinch. There were so many more important things happening in this moment than anything physical.

"I am scared, you're right about that. I can't... control this. I can't... keep it contained."

"Good. Let it out, then. Look, I'm sure this thing between us is gonna turn out to be deadly and maybe it'll kill us both. Or maybe it'll make us stronger and happier. I think we have to let it run its course. I can't just... *not* feel this way and I don't think you can either. I do actually love you, you know. It kinda snuck up on me and god knows I didn't invite it. But here I am, stupidly in love with you and desperate to make you happy."

Regina gave a sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh and looked down at the floor. She was still clutching Emma's hand tight. Emma reached out a hand and raised Regina's chin so she could see into her tear-filled eyes.

"Regina. I'm the fucking wanderer, here. If I'm staying and going with the flow, then so can you. Just let it happen."

Regina pulled Emma's hand up to her lips and kissed it awkwardly. A warm teardrop dropped down onto the back of Emma's hand. She wanted to hold Regina but she needed to see her reaction first, needed to hear her response before she could move.

Regina roughly kissed the hand in her grip again. "You annoying, happy-go-lucky, uncouth, godforsaken American. I think I'm in love with you too, and I'll never forgive you for it."

That was the cue Emma had been waiting for. She pulled Regina into her arms and felt her tears well up in her eyes too. Just as she kissed Regina's hair and was about to ask if this meant they were officially dating now, they both started at the sound of Regina's phone ringing.

Regina detangled herself and rushed to her handbag while clearing her throat.

"You could just leave it," Emma teased and slowly followed her.

Regina waved her away and cleared her throat once more before answering.

"Hello, Regina Mills speaking."

"Oh hello Miss Mills, this is Archibald Hopper. I am looking into the matter of a set of books that you own?"

Regina straightened up and Emma leaned in to hear clearer.

"Yes, that's right. Have you found anything, Mr Hopper?"

"I believe I have. Would you happen to have some time to come over and see for yourself what I have uncovered?"

"Yes, of course. Would tonight be suitable?"

"Sure, I understand that you must be eager to see what I've found. It really is most extraordinary!"

Regina looked at Emma with wide eyes. "I see. Well, just name the time and place and I will come and see what you have discovered. I will bring my private investigator if you don't mind?"

"Of course not, the more the merrier! How about 8.30ish?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"Good stuff! If you have a pen and paper to hand I will give you my address."

Regina rummaged around in her bag until she found a pen and a small notebook. Hopper gave her an address in Richmond and she dutifully

wrote it, and his suggestion for appropriate trains to get there, down in the leather-bound notebook.

"Thank you very much, Mr Hopper. We will see you tonight then."

"You are most welcome, Miss Mills. I'll see you tonight and I will provide tea and biccies."

"That sounds lovely. Thank you for calling. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Miss Mills."

Regina looked at Emma. "I... need to go freshen up and then finish the inventory and when we have closed the shop..."

"...we need to eat and take the train over to some place in Richmond, yeah, I heard it all. What do you think he found?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea. But whatever it is, I'm certain that getting to the bottom of it will change everything."

Emma caressed away the wet tracks of a tear on Regina's cheek. "Not everything. Not us."

Regina gave a shaky smile. "No, not us."

A certain Private Detective

They met up at the History of Medicine section of the Science museum again. John Withers arrived first as always. Llanza and Darby had travelled over on the tube together and joined Withers with the usual nod of greeting.

"Let us not beat about the bush. I need to meet up with my solicitor in half an hour," Withers said dryly.

Llanza grinned at the impatience. "Fine. Straight to the point then. I have called our former-Constable in his new home in the sun and after some mild threats he did manage to remember a blonde connected to this business."

Winters spat out the word; "and?"

"And she was a private detective working for Regina Mills, the owner of the bookshop where Darby first spotted the books."

Withers squinted at him through the piercing rays of the late afternoon sun coming in from the window. "I see. Do we have a name for this *detective*?"

"Yes, Emma Swan. She has an American accent and he saw her emerging from the American diner on the same street as the bookshop," Llanza said and cast a curious look at the display case of old syringes they were stood by.

Darby bristled at Llanza's relaxed air. "I don't see why you are standing about here being cheerful then. Do we have eyes and ears on the detective?"

"Not yet. I was planning to go visit the diner, and possibly the bookshop, after our meeting, just to get a look at this Emma Swan. I

thought it was best to inform you both first though, just as a precaution in case she has a habit of getting men run over and killed."

"Don't make such morbid jokes, Carlos," Darby hissed.

Withers held up his hand to stop any further debate.

"Gentlemen, as I said, I do have to be going. Carlos, I will trust you and some of your henchmen to keep an eye on this woman and see if she shows any signs of having taken the books. It's not a strong lead, but it is all we have. Darby, you can start to plan a possible break-in in the bookshop and possibly at this diner as well, if this Miss Swan really has any connection to it."

"Alright," Darby said through a tight set jaw.

"Of course, my friends," Llanza replied casually.

"Good. That is settled then. After my appointment with my solicitor I shall pass by Regina Mills' flat and see if she leaves or returns with any Tate Modern tote bag. I'm aware that there is only a miniscule chance of that, but that is all we have now, I'm afraid. Nevertheless, don't fret, gentlemen. We have been chasing these books for far too long to give up now that we are so close. We will meet late tonight at the Oldboys club and discuss our findings. Non Omnis Moriar."

The other two nodded and took their leave. Withers cast a glance at the syringes next to him and sighed. He felt too old for this cat and mouse game. But he couldn't stop. Those books would change everything. He just had to get to them before it was too late for him.

It was a strange few hours before Henry's Books could close. The two lovers strange new relationship hung over them and so did the promise of a breakthrough in the case. Regina was tense, and Emma soon found that a tense Regina was a cranky Regina. After the fourth time of having her head bitten off for no reason, Emma had to say something.

"Okay, no. Stop. I'm the person you're dating, not a dummy for target practice. If you're gonna be like this we should just close the shop early. Or maybe see if Mary is free to run the shop while we go to Richmond a few hours before schedule. I'm not having you hurling abuse at me until 8.30."

Regina rubbed her forehead. "I'm sorry. But no, Emma, we can't do that. We can't close the shop as I need the business, Mary is probably busy with her own life and besides; arriving that early would be rude. There isn't much time left before we can finally close the shop and leave for Richmond. I'll try not to snap at you, dear."

Emma walked over and stole a quick kiss. "You'll have to make it up to me, you know."

Regina gave her a flirty smirk. "Really? What could I possibly..." she stopped as she stared past Emma into the shop behind her. "Hang on, I know just how to make it up to you. I was going to give you something that I found during the inventory. Now is a perfect time for it!"

Emma sighed. She had hoped for a little affection or some sexy time but apparently she was getting a book instead. Regina brought back a crisp, thick little hardback and handed it to Emma. She turned it over and saw the title: 'Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea'.

"Hey, it's *our* book! I thought there wasn't a copy of that in the shop."

Regina looked uncomfortable. "As I said, I found it during the inventory."

Emma grinned. "I can tell when you're lying. No, you didn't."

Regina looked annoyed and sighed demonstratively. "No, I didn't. I committed the cardinal sin of buying a new copy from Amazon to give to you. Enough about that, open it and read the inscription on the title page."

Emma did as she was asked and found a message from Regina. The elegant, loping penmanship was impressive as always but more than anything it was the words that shook Emma to the core. It was obvious that Regina had written this before today as there was still some distance being put into the phrasing. But Emma could see the emotion beneath the surface, mainly because she could see the nervous woman in front of her who looked at her expectantly with her hand held protectively over her stomach.

The inscription read:

To My Private Detective,

This book will for always be connected to you in my mind. By giving you a copy, I hope you will feel the same. I hope you will think of me whenever you hear about perilous journeys or underwater adventures. Or perhaps just that you will think of me in general.

Thank you for everything you have done and most of all, thank you for putting up with me. I know that is not an easy task.

Regina.

Emma felt a buzzing in her stomach, as if it was filled with champagne bubbles. Regina's affection was like a high and Emma's body reacted even more violently to it than it had to Regina's sexual attention. She wedged the book under her arm and threw herself at Regina, squeezing her in a tight bear-hug. Regina gave a little laugh and complained about being squished.

"Oh stop bitching, you'll live. Thank you, Regina! That is so damn sweet."

Regina looked uncomfortable again. "It's nothing, really. You deserve a treat. I was going to give it to you when you had solved the case but there is no time like the present. And besides, you'll want it for the train ride to Richmond."

Emma gently grabbed Regina's face and kissed her. Regina returned the kiss and let her hands snake around Emma's waist. The kiss ended softly and they both stood with closed eyes, revelling in the feel and taste of each other. This was so new and so precious.

After a while, Emma chuckled. "You mean that I should read on the train and not spend the trip staring at your pretty face and asking you stupid questions?"

"Precisely, Miss Swan."

The shop's phone rang and Regina hurried over to it, seemingly glad for the interruption. Emma looked after her with a big, silly grin on her face. That stylish, interesting, passionate, intellectual and let's face it... drop dead gorgeous woman had actually admitted that she wanted to be with her and she couldn't believe her luck.

Then the anxious, nervous feeling kicked in again, what were they going to find when they went to see Archibald Hopper in a few hours? She stared at her scuffed wristwatch. Why wasn't it closing time yet?

The breakthrough

Chapter Notes

Author's note: Remember when you read the summary of this fic and saw the words "touches of urban fantasy"? Well.... keep that in mind.

After a quick meal they had caught a tube and then the train and were now almost in Richmond. Regina's nerves were frayed and she was trying very hard not to lash out at Emma because of it. Currently the object of her thoughts was sitting next to her and reading her book with her free hand laid casually on Regina's knee. She looked so calm. Once more Regina admired Emma's confidence and apparent lack of anxiety.

Richmond was called out as the next station and Regina immediately packed away the book she had been attempting, but failing, to read. Emma just tucked her book under her arm and slowly zipped up her leatherjacket. Regina snatched the book and crammed it into her handbag without asking, a gesture which just made Emma give her a patient smile. By the time the train stopped, Regina was already by the doors, coat and handbag all ready and perfect. Emma walked up to her while putting a black woolly hat on.

They got off the train and Regina got her phone out, she had put the address for Hopper's house into Google maps before they left and now they just followed the directions. Ten minutes later they were standing outside a tall but narrow terraced Victorian workman's cottage. Regina took a quick breath and rang the doorbell. A middle-aged man with ginger, curly hair and glasses opened the door.

"Hello there! Regina Mills I presume?"

Regina gave her polite customer-facing smile. "Yes. And this is Emma Swan."

"A pleasure to meet you, ladies. Come on in, this November cold is no fun, is it?"

"No," Regina replied in clipped tones.

Emma knew that she didn't mean to be rude. She was just being Regina, meaning that this was a tense situation and she wanted to get to the gist of the matter and skip the small talk. They walked into the tiny hallway and Emma turned to Archibald Hopper to reply a little more cordially.

"It's *freezing* tonight. I'm glad I brought the beanie, my ears get absolutely frozen if I don't wear one," Emma added with a warm smile.

Archibald Hopper smiled back at her, recognising another friendly soul.

"Well it's a fetching hat, Miss Swan. Is that an American accent I detect?"

Regina rolled her eyes as she took her gloves off and put them in her coat pockets before taking her coat off.

"Yup, guilty as charged," Emma said. She was still smiling while taking off her leather jacket and beanie to hang them next to Regina's coat on the coat stand.

"Nothing to feel guilty about, I love America. I've been at lots of lectures and auctions across the pond and it's so nice that everyone is so friendly and chatty."

"Glad to hear it," Emma said before glancing over to catch Regina gritting her teeth. Time to wrap this up before Regina's blood pressure hit the roof.

Emma looked back at their host. "Anyway, Mr Hopper. I think you had something for us?"

"Oh of course! But please call me Archie. Would you like tea and biccies first?"

Emma's forehead furrowed and Regina quickly translated "he's referring to biscuits. British biscuits that is, like your cookies but less over-the-top."

Emma stared daggers at her. "I know what your biscuits are like, I've been here before! I just don't think I've heard the word 'biccies'. A bit like the first time I heard about an 'oyster card' and 'the tube'. Your version of English is weird!"

Regina hissed, "it's not a *version*, it's the original."

Emma stopped her. "Okay, okay. Sorry, let's change the topic." She turned to their host again. "Sorry 'bout that, Archie. We bicker like this all the time, don't worry about it. I think we'll go straight to the books if you don't mind? It wasn't that long since we ate and we are really eager to get to the bottom of this."

"Naturally. Righty-ho, I examine artefacts and items down in the basement. I hope you don't mind coming down there, it's not as glum and dank as it sounds. It's actually quite cosy."

He walked towards a small door and the two women followed. Regina muttered "it better not be *cosy* in a serial killer way." Emma slapped her on the arm and got a fiery glare in response.

They walked down a little wooden staircase and found themselves in what looked like a laboratory on one side of the room and a pantry on the other. The effect of a room which was furnished with a white table with flasks, petri dishes and a Bunsen burner on one side and shelves with jam, tins of food and condensed milk on the other was odd. But strangely sweet, Emma thought. This Archibald Hopper seemed like the typical eccentric, academic, English bachelor to her. Regina on the other

hand was looking at him suspiciously and Emma assumed that the bookseller still wondered if he was a serial killer.

"The books are over here," he said and walked up to the bright white table while putting on a pair of latex gloves. On the left side of the table the books were stacked up next to an extra wide petri dish which had white powder in it.

"What's that," Emma asked and leaned over to look at the powder.

Archie looked excited. "That's what I called you about. That is one of the endpapers from volume one!"

Emma frowned. "What's an endpaper?"

Regina stared at the powder perplexedly as she explained. "Endpapers are the blank pages you sometimes find at the start and end of a published book."

"Exactly," Archie agreed. "I wanted to examine the paper from the books so I chose the first one without text on it. I did all the normal tests on it and discovered that it isn't paper at all. Well, it functions as paper now but it's actually something else."

Emma was still frowning in confusion. "The papers are really... powder?"

"Well, that is what they become if you submerge them in water and then let them dry out. It's lucky you didn't drop any of these books in the bath or you'd be left without anything more than this white powder. It takes submerging though, so a little rain wouldn't have much effect. It's very cleverly done."

Regina looked up at him. "Cleverly *done*? So you are certain this was done intentionally?"

He scratched the back of his head. "I would say so yes, paper that dissolves into powder like that... why would you print books on that? If

you just wanted cheap paper there are plenty of options. This... this is something new and quite frankly, I don't know what to make of it. Here, look at this."

He picked up Volume 2 of *This Unkindness of Ravens* and very carefully and meticulously cut the first endpaper out with a scalpel. When he had the loose page in his hand he began to fold it until it was quite small. He got a glass bowl of water from the other end of the table and dropped the folded paper into it.

First it just fizzed. *Like when you pour baking powder into water*, Emma thought. Then white smoke spiralled up from the surface of the water. When it had calmed and no fizz and only the slightest hint of smoke remained; Archie poured the contents of the bowl through a filter and into another bowl. When the water was all in the second bowl, the filter was covered in a white substance which looked a bit like wet sugar. He poured it onto a petri dish and as they watched: it solidified into the same dry, white powder he had shown them first.

"That was what I wanted to show you. I must confess that I don't understand why it does that but I can only assume that the pages are actually just a front and this powder is what all the fuss is about."

Regina stared at the powder and spoke quietly, almost as if she was thinking out loud.

"If you wanted to hide a powder, what better way to do it then disguising it as something else. For example, as pages in a book that no one would want to read. It's brilliant."

Emma and Archie looked at each other before Archie replied.

"Yes, actually, it is. I suppose that must be what this is about. But I can't tell you anything more or analyse the powder any further. I'm not a chemist or a real scientist. I just examine old items and test them out so I'm afraid... this is as far as my expertise goes."

Regina smiled at him and this smile was genuine.

"Please don't worry about that. You have done what none of us could do: solve the lion share of the mystery. Now we have something to work with. I'm indebted to you. Is there some way I can thank you? Pay you, perhaps?"

"Oh no, Miss Mills. Helping to solve this mystery is reward enough for me. Well, that and some company for my evening tea. If you would still like some tea and biccies?"

Regina hesitated and Emma thought she was going to decline the offer as she wanted to contact someone else about the next part of the investigation right away. But to Emma's relief Regina reached for the tote bag which had been discarded under the table and began to put the books into it while saying, "of course we would. In fact, if you have any ginger nut in that biscuit tin of yours - you will have made my night, Mr Hopper."

He smiled from ear to ear. "Please call me Archie, Miss Mills."

Regina looked up from her task. "Of course, dear. If you call me Regina. Feel free to go put the kettle on and I'll just pack this up."

He nodded and went upstairs. When he was gone Regina quietly said, "pour all the powder into one of the petri dishes and we'll take it with us. I'd like to keep it all together."

"Why? Don't you trust Archie?"

"It's not about trust. It just makes sense to keep it all together and to not leave any traces behind in case the people who are chasing these books find their way here. It will keep him safe as well."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Emma agreed and began to pour both sets of powder into the large petri dish and sealing it up.

"Remind me to dig out my old briefcase when we get back to my flat. I want to see if I can fit all the books into it, they'll be safer and more waterproofed in that."

Emma smiled. "When we get back to your flat? You're taking me home with you, gorgeous?"

"Of course I am. I'm not going through all that sappy palaver we did at the shop today without getting to enjoy the fruits of my labour."

"Oh... is that what we are calling it now?"

"Less talking and more packing up, Miss Swan."

Emma laughed and placed the petri dish in the tote bag on top of all the books.

"By the way, do you even drink tea? I always see you guzzling coffee."

Regina looked affronted. "Dear, I'm British. My bloodstream is filled with 80% blood and 20% tea. It is not a matter of liking it or not. It's tea... you just drink it. Actually, I usually have it on Sundays when I come back from getting my ice cream. It's a perfect companion to a good book on a late Sunday afternoon."

Emma smiled at the mention of the Sunday ice cream ritual.

"It sounds like Sundays with you are pretty awesome. I think I'd like this ice cream-trek-followed-with-tea-and-book thing. Does it work for two people or is it more of a single person's project?"

Regina looked up at her with a knowing smirk.

"I have a feeling that plenty of things I have been doing in my life are going to turn into activities for two, Emma. Wouldn't you agree?"

Emma didn't have time to reply as they heard Archie shout that the kettle was boiled. They shared a very quick kiss and ascended the stairs with the books and the powder safely resting in the bag.

Like ships that pass in the night

Carlos Llanza wasn't retired like John Withers and didn't set his own work schedule like Walter Darby. He had certain hours to put in, and while he could often pretend to have meetings to sneak out and threaten men like Locksley or for other shady appointments, he still had work to do and rich clients to schmooze. By the time he left his workplace in Knightsbridge to go find Emma Swan, and do surveillance on the locale that Locksley had seen her come out of, it was late and he was hungry.

He grinned to himself as he remembered that it was an American diner he was meant to be investigating for signs of Emma Swan. He had always been very partial to hamburgers. Life was smiling at him once more.

The diner turned out to be nice and the hamburger delicious. The problem was its owner.

When Llanza sat down and was served by a beautiful, tall brunette he tried to gently ask some questions. Nothing too invasive... just if they had been here long, if they lived on the premises... so far so good. The charming brunette answered in a friendly, open way so Llanza advanced to ask if anyone else was living there with them and if they had any dealings with the owner of the bookshop further down the street. Suddenly the waitress' eyes grew suspicious and she excused herself without answering.

Llanza cursed his false move as he saw her go up to an old woman by the counter and whisper for quite a while. He sighed deeply and finished his meal. The other two customers in the diner left money on their table and waved goodbye to the two women as they left. Llanza drank the last of his beer in sullen silence. When he looked up, the old woman was standing next to him and staring at him over her glasses with her arms crossed over her chest.

"Hi. I own this place. My granddaughter said you'd been asking a lot of strange questions."

Llanza tried to turn on his charm as much as he could and gave a big, suave smile.

"Not a lot of questions, Madam. Just a few friendly enquiries. I'm curious about this lovely place and generally any newcomers to our area."

"You're not from this area. I'd know your face," the woman replied surly.

"Ah, no. But I visit here a lot. I frequent that bookshop down there, which is why I asked about it. I have seen a blonde woman in there a few times and I think she might have said that she was a regular in your establishment? She might have mentioned that she often came here for coffee or tea in the morning?"

Eugenia Lucas snorted. "Well that's a big load of BS, if you pardon my French. Now, I don't like creepy men who ask a lot of weird questions. So what do you say to that you pay for your burger and leave and I'll let you have the beer for free as a parting gift."

Carlos Llanza had lived in London for the last thirty years and he had climbed his way to fortune, and even some fame in the right circles, here. He was rich and influential. He had a certain gravitas and an air of cruelty about him. All this meant that he was not used to being spoken to in this way. His dark, meticulously plucked eyebrows came down to his eyes and he stood up to his full height, looking down at the old woman. His voice was a hiss of menace as he spoke.

"Now look here, you old bat. I came in here to ask questions nicely when I could have just sent masked brutes to put knives to your throats and squeeze the truth out of you. Take that tone with me again and I might just use that tactic instead. Now. Do you know of a blonde woman called Emma Swan? Does she come here to eat? Does she perhaps even live here with you?"

Eugenia snorted and grinned at him. "Do you really think you can scare me, you potbellied Julio Iglesias? Last time a low life tried to rob me back in the States, do you know what I did? I got out my great uncle Albert's old crossbow and arrow, blew the dust off 'em and shot an arrow in his thigh. He was lucky I missed his family jewels!"

She took a step closer to him before she continued. "Now, I don't have a crossbow here but if you look over at the counter you'll see that my granddaughter is standing there with a highly sharpened meat cleaver and her phone all ready to call the cops. So I'd just pay up for the burger and leave if I were you."

Llanza turned and looked at the young woman at the counter. She held up the huge knife which gleamed in the light and then gave him a terrifying, wolfish smile. She did have her mobile phone in her other hand but Llanza was more focused on the meat cleaver which she was slowly swaying in his direction as if she was deciding where she would slash first.

He turned back to Eugenia and had another attempt at his questions. This time he shouted louder and used more colourful language. Her only response was to growl at him and inform him that he now had to pay for the beer as well.

While Carlos Llanza was facing Eugenia Lucas and hissing insults at her in three different languages, Emma and Regina passed by the diner unseen on their way to the tube to go see Archie Hopper.

Five minutes later, when Llanza left the diner in a rage, cursing himself for not controlling his temper, he noticed that the lights were off in the bookshop and hoped that the elusive Miss Swan had not been in there in company of Miss Mills. He comforted himself with that if she was, Withers would spot them both by Regina Mills' home. Then he went home to drown his frustration in brandy until it was time to meet Withers and Darby at the Oldboys club.

Withers appointment had run late and then he had a long call from his daughter who was at Cambridge and apparently in need of emergency funds. By the time he got to Regina Mills' flat it was 8.15 and the place looked dark and empty from what he could see from the street. He wondered if she had been home and gone back out or if she hadn't come home yet.

He waited out in the cold for a little more than half an hour and then had to stiffly walk to a busier street to hail a taxi home. He cursed the cold and his old bones and berated himself for not driving over in the Lexus. He could have waited for her for much longer if he was warm and snug in the Lexus. But driving in London was... driving in London and so he had been taking taxis all day. He could only hope that Carlos Llanza had been luckier in his mission.

Emma still wasn't a big fan of tea. If she was going to have tea it would have to be ice tea or that sweet stuff you get in Morocco. But she had drunk her PG tips with milk and sugar while Archie and Regina discussed auctions and types of biscuits they loved as children. Emma made a move to leave when she noticed that Regina's guest face was slipping and soon they were on the train back to central London. Emma got comfy in her seat and crossed her legs before turning to Regina.

"So, are we gonna read again or discuss this new turn of events."

Regina looked around. The train was pretty much empty, but for a guy who seemed to be showing off the length of his dreads to his friend. They were sitting on the opposite side of the train facing Emma and Regina, but three rows down. Both guys seemed utterly indifferent to what two, un-cool, thirty-something women were talking about. Regina decided that they weren't interested in their conversation and looked back at Emma.

"I think we can discuss the case if we speak quietly."

Emma sat forward. "Sure thing. So... the books are actually a weird powder masquerading as... well, books. Why? What? Where?"

Regina looked frustrated. "I don't know! All I know is that those books have been in my father's shop for a very long time. He found them curious and I think he enjoyed trying to figure out what the writer was trying to say with his endless ramblings about 'this unkindness of ravens' which clearly plagued him."

"So you don't think your dad knew that they were something more than regular books?"

A crease formed on Regina's forehead as she thought about that for a few seconds.

"I honestly don't know. I don't think so. He seemed to be fascinated by the words, not the physical form of the books."

Emma nodded. "Okay. So we can assume that he bought the books somewhere and kept them as a curio. Why didn't he have them at home by the way?"

Regina sighed. "Oh, Mother wouldn't let him. She found them to be, and I quote, 'vulgar, crazed mumblings of a dribbling idiot' and had no patience for them. She had very little patience for anything that Daddy or I liked and she didn't."

Emma reached over and squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry. I'm glad that's all in the past now, babe."

Regina raised an eyebrow at the term of endearment but decided to let it go.

"Right, so, your dad stumbled upon the books and kept them in his shop. Somehow, some shady people found them in the shop and clearly knew that they were more than just weird books. How did they know that? Who are these people? If we figure that out we might figure out what the powder is."

"Yes, dear. But you are missing one important thing: we know even less about the people trying to purloin the books than we do about the actual books," Regina said tersely.

"Fine! I'm just brainstorming here, stop ruining my detective flow."

Regina swallowed down a comment about what she thought of Emma's current detective flow. Emma sighed and looked dejectedly out the window. Clearly her own thoughts were on the same theme.

"Maybe this wasn't a good first case for me. I mean, I thought I'd be chasing down cheating spouses and runaway kids. This... this is a little too weird for me. Maybe you need someone more experienced."

"Emma, don't say that. You're my optimistic American, I need you to be cheerful and confident here. After all, we are making progress. Now we know what the books are."

Emma scoffed. "Yeah, but not what they are *for*. I mean god, the powder could be drugs as far as we know."

Regina scrunched up her nose in disgust. "Hardly! Why would anyone hide drugs in books and then never come to claim it? No, someone hid this away in the hope that it would either not be discovered at all or not be discovered until people were more informed and guessed what it was."

Emma thought about that for a moment as she looked back out at the parts of Greater London that were whooshing past their window.

"Yeah, you're right. This DeLuca guy was probably mentally unstable, judging by what's in those books. BUT he wouldn't have put in all the effort of making the powder into a large set of books, writing all that poetry and printing the books properly - just to hide dope. If it was drugs, he'd use it or sell it. Or, if he needed to get rid of it, flushed it down the toilet."

"Exactly," Regina said as she looked around carefully again.

"Oh relax. There's only us and those two guys who don't even seem to realise we're here. I wouldn't talk about this unless I'd triple-checked that we weren't overheard first."

Regina smiled warmly at her. "See, you are a better detective than you give yourself credit for."

Emma shrugged despondently and looked back out through the window.

"You're the only detective I want. I trust you implicitly and I know you'll solve this. You just have to believe in yourself as much as I do," Regina said softly.

Emma felt a smile forming and couldn't stop herself from leaning in to give Regina a long, tender kiss. It felt strange and new to do it in public, but it somehow still seemed... right to both of them. Emma ended it with a loud, smacking kiss-noise. One of the guys heard it and looked at them for the first time and Regina tensed, prepared for an objectifying comment or a homophobic slur. The guy with the dreads threw his hands up in the air and looked back at his friend.

"Bloody hell! *Everyone* has a girl but me."

"Cuz you're ugly," said his friend calmly.

"Shut up, mate. At least I don't look like a pig's bollocks like you do," the first guy said with a huff.

Emma just smiled at Regina and quietly said, "relax. I told you, I had triple-checked and decided that they weren't a threat."

Regina just shook her head at Emma but slowly let her tense shoulders drop slightly. The train slowed down and the train's last stop, Waterloo, was announced and Regina and Emma started to get ready to leave while the two guys were still busy joking around about which of them was uglier. As the doors opened and they left the train, Regina let her hand brush Emma's in a light caress. Emma smiled, knowing that she

was slowly making Regina more comfortable with the idea of them as a couple.

A tube ride and a walk later, they were back in Regina's flat and Emma was just hanging up her jacket and woolly hat when she spoke.

"You know, I don't think we're gonna get any further until we know what the powder is. I don't really want to involve anyone new in this, not until we know what we are dealing with. Maybe Rupert Gold knows any discreet chemists? He seems to have all kinds of contacts and he already knows about the books."

Regina reached past her to hang her coat up. "Perhaps. I certainly owe it to him to ring and thank him for introducing Archie to us. I can ask him after I've thanked him."

There was a buzzing coming from Emma's jeans pocket. She fished out her phone and looked at it while chewing her lip.

"Yeah, great. Um, something's come up. I need to go get something. Could you ring Gold by yourself and let me know what he said when I get back?"

Regina bristled a little at the sudden secrecy but tried not to let it show.

"Of course."

"Cool," Emma said and grabbed her jacket again. "I should be back pretty soon. Half an hour or so depending on the tubes."

"Alright. Be careful and I'll see you soon then."

"Absolutely", Emma said and grabbed Regina for a quick kiss. Then she hurried out the door, leaving her lover perplexed and worried.

A tepid phone call, a cold surprise and a hot shower.

Chapter Notes

Author's note: slightly nsfw.

Regina was sitting on the sofa and reading a book review on her iPhone when Emma rang the doorbell. Regina saw the smiling blonde through the peep hole and unlocked the door.

As soon as Emma came in she kissed Regina as if she had been gone for 24 hours and not 20 minutes. Regardless of what time had passed, Regina had been anxious and so the kiss was very welcome. Emma's lips were cold from the evening air and there were pink roses on her cheeks. Regina also couldn't help noticing that Emma was carrying a bag which she was hiding behind her back.

"Hey, stop looking at that! It's a surprise. I'm gonna need you to close your eyes while I put it in the kitchen and then you can tell me about your call with Gold. If you did call him that is?"

"Yes, I did. Will this... surprise be unveiled after we have spoken about the call?"

Emma grinned. "Maybe. If you're good."

"You bitch," Regina mumbled but she was secretly relieved.

The hurried departure and the secrecy was all about a surprise and judging by Emma's delighted grin, a nice one. She had been worried that

some ghosts from Emma's past had reappeared or that she had received some news which would make the world traveller have to leave London again.

Emma took off her leather jacket and then went into the kitchen to do whatever it was he had to do with the bag. Regina stayed in the hallway, toying unconsciously with her bracelet and feeling her heart slow its rapid beat and her anxiety lessening with the relaxation of her muscles. She suddenly realised how afraid she had been of losing Emma. This was ridiculous, Emma had only gone out for a quick errand, one that apparently was a nice surprise and yet... Regina had been so on edge that her entire body had reacted.

Emma, unaware of what was going on in Regina's mind, came into the room with her usual swagger and said, "Okay, I'm back. So, shoot, what did he say?"

Regina turned to stare at Emma and then ran over to her to grab her face and bring it to hers in a deep, needy kiss. Emma struggled in confusion at first but then rolled with it and kissed back with the same intensity.

When the kiss ended, Emma gaspingly drew breath. "Whoa! What was that about?"

Regina looked embarrassed. "I don't... do well with uncertainty. When you left in such secrecy, I suppose I..."

Emma's brow furrowed. "...was worried? Oh, I'm sorry, babe. I should have told you that I was going out to pick up something. I'm kinda new to this relationship thing, I usually just do what I want."

Regina gave a quiet chuckle. "That makes two of us. But careful with your words, we are dating, not in a relationship."

Emma scoffed. "Regina. If we were just dating, you'd be *curious* about me taking off like that... not this freaked out. I'm pretty sure we jumped headfirst into a relationship at some point."

Regina grimaced. "Yes, I suppose you are right. Heaven help us. Anyway, sorry for overreacting. I just worry that something will make you leave London. And more importantly, leave *me*."

"I sure as hell won't if you keep kissing me like that!"

"Really? Is that what it will take? Well, come here then," Regina said with a wide smile and pulled Emma to her by the front of her sweater.

This kiss was slower and clearly went more towards the sensual direction. Regina's hands backed that claim up by letting go of her fistfuls of Emma's sweater to let them grab Emma's breasts instead.

Emma abruptly ended the kiss with a groan. "Keep doing that and we won't discuss the phone call or even look at your surprise."

Regina whispered her response hotly against Emma's lips. "No? What *would* we be *doing*?"

"You. In every position and every orifice."

Regina pushed her away with a theatrical gasp. "Emma Swan! You kinky, little tart!"

Emma just laughed and reached out to caress Regina's cheek.

"Seriously, tell me about the call before we get distracted again."

"Fine. Let's sit down."

When they were on the sofa, Regina took her high heels off and rubbed at the arch of her foot before opening her mouth to speak.

"Give 'em here," Emma said and pointed at Regina's stockinged feet.

Regina looked unsure but swung her legs up into Emma's lap in the most ladylike fashion possible. Emma began to rub at the top of the arch of the right foot, exactly where her own feet always hurt when she wore high heels.

"Go on, what did he say?"

Regina gave a soft moan but then collected herself. "He said that he was glad that we had found something. He sounded almost disappointed that the books turned out to only be a disguise, though. I think he wanted there to be some deep meaning buried in the text."

Emma switched to the arch of the left foot and was rewarded with a happy sigh before Regina continued speaking.

"He said he didn't know any chemists personally but that he could certainly get us in contact with one. However, he suggested another course of action."

"Really? What?"

"Going to the police."

Emma laughed mirthlessly and rolled her eyes.

"No, listen. The Met are usually very efficient and do things professionally and thoroughly. They have a good reputation and we shouldn't judge them by one rogue constable who clearly had a stroke one day and went against everything he had been taught. They have the means to investigate this on a grander scale and now that we have something to show them, something more than a cryptic note from a burglar who didn't steal anything and some odd books, they will have to listen to us and take action."

"I don't know. I just think we should solve this ourselves if we can," Emma said while she gave the rest of Regina's feet a quick massage too, just for good measure and well... to see more of that relaxed bliss on Regina's face.

Regina stifled a little moan before speaking. "I know. But they have a forensics lab and plenty of experts. They can also contact the authorities in different countries and see if books like these have shown up anywhere else. They might even have records of books that turn into

powder popping up *here in the UK*. They have the resources that you and I lack, Emma. Not to mention that the books will be safer in their hands and we will be safer far away from the books. "

"Yeah, that's true. Okay, tell you what. We'll think about it and decide tomorrow."

"Fine. Does that mean that I will be receiving my surprise when you are done with my very grateful feet?"

Emma smirked. "Look at you, getting a foot rub, a present and probably lots of head when we retire for the night. Quite the royal treatment."

Regina laughed. "I'll be your Queen if you'll be mine."

Emma looked up at the ceiling while she rubbed circles on Regina's left heel. "Queen Emma? Yeah, I think I'd like that. But you are probably more blue-blooded than I am."

"That won't stop me from being your loyal subject between the sheets tonight," Regina said with a flirty smile. "But only if I get my surprise."

"Really curious about that, huh?"

"Yes, I suppose I am, and that is saying something because I'm usually not a fan of surprises. I find them... threatening."

Emma laughed. "Well, this one isn't scary at all. Unless you worry about rotting your teeth."

"Ah, so it's edible? Chocolates?"

"Oh please. I'm not that unimaginative. Stop guessing and come to the kitchen with me."

Unwillingly, Regina pulled her feet away from Emma's pretty hands and placed them back on the floor. Emma got up and headed for the kitchen with Regina a few steps behind her. There was no sign of eagerness in

Regina's body language but Emma knew that she was more and more curious by the second.

When they were in the kitchen Emma took out the bag she had stashed away in the freezer and handed it to Regina. She accepted the bag, wincing at the chill of it, and opened it. Inside was a small packet of ice cream. Bubblegum ice cream. Regina laughed and looked up at Emma, who was beaming like a proud mother.

"I know a guy who runs an American candy shop here. After last Sunday I wanted to make up for the fact that you never got to eat your ice cream because you were too busy explaining it all to me. So I texted him, thank god he hadn't changed his number, and asked him if they stock bubblegum ice cream. They didn't right now but they used to, so they had a supplier. Anyway, he had some brought in on his next shipment and when we got back tonight, he texted me to say that it had arrived and I should hurry down there before he closed for the evening."

"A sweet shop was open that late?"

"On some evenings, yeah. You'd be surprised at what the young people of London want to eat at ten at night. Especially with drugs or copious amounts of alcohol in their bloodstream."

Regina gave a non-committal grunt and then looked down at the ice cream. Suddenly Emma felt uncertain of her plan.

"Hey, look. I'm sure you can get that in the bigger supermarkets around here if you wanted to and I'm sorry if I messed up the magic around your Sunday ritual by making it kinda... mundane, like this. I just wanted to thank you for sharing the story with me and to make up for your missed sugar intake."

Regina looked up quickly. "Oh, dearest, no. You haven't messed anything up. Any 'magic' of my Sunday ritual is far surpassed by the magic of someone caring enough about me to get me this and to not even make a joke about my childish addiction. I am very grateful to you and extremely touched that you thought to get me this and that you went out

alone late at night just to pick it up for me. I was just quiet because I was contemplating whether I wanted to sit with you on the sofa and eat this from bowls while watching a movie or..."

"... or?"

"Or push you onto that table and serve it off your breasts so I could lick it all off and then take you to bed."

The sentence caught Emma by surprise and hit her hard and she swallowed thickly.

"I vote for option two. I mean, if you want. Option one sounds really lovely but honestly, the combo of cold ice cream and your warm mouth: I think the girls really want that," she said and seductively ran her hands over her breasts to show whom she was talking about.

Regina gave a wolfish grin and placed the packet on the counter with a loud thud.

"So be it. Take your shirt and bra off and get on the table," she said in low, husky tones and ripped the ice cream pack open.

A quick whimper of arousal escaped Emma's lips before she began to ignore the instructions by madly pulling *all* of her clothes off and throwing them in a pile below the fridge.

Suddenly Regina stopped. "Wait a moment. Why did you still have his number? Surely you don't keep the number of everyone you befriend around the world?"

"What? Who?"

"Oh Emma, don't be obtuse. The man who imported the ice cream for you."

"Oh, Tim! Right. Well, in all honesty I only keep their number if they're really good in bed and I want to keep them in my contact book as a future hook-up if I come back to town."

A brief look of fury passed Regina's face. "Before the week is over I will have made you replace his number with mine."

Emma shook her head as she took off her socks. "Your number will never replace someone else's, it's in their in its own right as you are on an entirely different level. You are far too important to just be another hook-up. He's in my phone book as Tim From London. Right now, you're in there as Regina Mills, but say the word and I'll change it to 'babe'. Or 'honey'. Or 'Bae'. Or 'sexy pants'."

Regina took out a tablespoon from a drawer. "Those are all appalling. I will accept 'better half', I think."

Emma put her hands on her naked hips and shrugged. "Sure, if you put me down as 'My pussy's favourite' in yours."

Regina made a disgusted face. "Are you trying to provoke me and start an argument?"

Emma grinned. "I don't know. Are *you*?"

"We can have sex without that friction between us, you know."

"Yeah, and I'm pretty sure we will before the sun comes up. But let's face it... it's more fun when we both have our adrenaline going."

"You're impossible!"

"Takes one to know one, gorgeous. Oh, that's what I should call you in my contacts – gorgeous!"

Regina was too busy objectifying her naked body to bother responding. Instead she just growled, "get on the table right now" while staring at Emma's bared sex.

Emma smirked around the lip she was biting and quickly obeyed. When she was laying over the small table, with her feet still on the ground but her back planted firmly on the table top, Regina came over to inspect her new dessert plate.

She slowly stroked Emma's sculpted stomach and traced the lines of the barely visible abs before bringing her palms up to caress the breasts with their aching hard nipples. Emma gave a long, pleased moan and arched her back up to make her breasts press tighter against the olive-skinned hands covering them.

Regina felt butterflies dancing in her stomach and had to remind herself what she was supposed to be doing. She went back to the counter and picked up the opened packet of ice cream. Despite having had a short sojourn in the freezer, it still wasn't rock hard so it was easy to get a spoonful up and walk it over to the beautiful blonde laid out over the table.

Regina used her finger to coax the blue ice cream off the spoon and onto the breast below. It fell partially on the nipple and then slid down the breasts towards Emma's sternum. Regina enjoyed hearing Emma gasp and watching her sharp intake of breath at the coldness on her sensitive skin. Regina bent over and caught the sliding ice cream with her mouth. Then she licked a trail up to where it had first landed until there was no trace of blue on the breast.

"I barely tasted that. More," Regina hissed and went back to the packet. She left the spoon there and instead dug her long fingers into the softening ice cream, ignoring the cold and scooping up a large amount. She brought it over to Emma, who shivered in anticipation when she saw the amount of cold that was going straight onto her overheated skin.

Regina gave Emma a devilish smile and then smeared all of the ice cream over Emma's breasts. Half of it on the left and the other on the right. She made sure it covered the soft mounds totally and now the melting blue ice cream was running in little trails in all directions over Emma's torso. Emma was breathing fast, mainly because of the cold but also because of the wicked and excruciatingly sexy look on her lover's face. She was already so wet and swollen that she felt like her pussy was aching for Regina.

"You know I'll make you pay for this later," she panted.

Regina merely nodded while staring happily at the ice cream dripping onto the floor, down to Emma's neck and over her stomach and into her shallow, little belly button. When the navel was filled, she finally replied.

"I'm certain you will, and honestly, it will be a punishment in itself to clean all this sticky dried ice cream off the floor and table when we are done but... it will all be worth it. Now be a good ice cream bowl and be quiet while I have my treat."

She put her long hair behind her ears and once more bent over. Cleaning Emma up was a bigger job now and she took her time to make sure she didn't miss a spot. Of course, it didn't help that Emma squirmed and whimpered at the contrast of the cold ice cream and the warm, eager mouth. Nonetheless, she got the job done. She finished by sucking up all the ice cream in Emma's belly button with a surprisingly undignified slurp. With an aching jaw, cold tongue and flecks of blue ice cream on her lips, she looked up at Emma who now was shivering from the cold and her desire.

"Get in the shower, dearest. We are going to get you cleaned up and I'm going to have my second dessert," Regina said huskily while cupping Emma's pussy to show just what exactly her second dessert was.

Emma smiled. "Whatever you say. But you'll have to help me up, I'm really stiff after laying like that. A long hot shower and your tongue up my slit sounds like a great remedy for that, though."

"Vulgar," Regina purred happily.

She helped Emma up and kissed her open-mouthed. Emma tasted the ice cream and congratulated herself on a good surprise. Hand in hand they hurried to the shower.

Surveillance & reconnaissance

They had greeted each other and stood in silence for a spell. It was unusual that Darby and Withers met alone and Darby couldn't help but wonder why Withers hadn't wanted Llanza present. Walter Darby wasn't usually driven by his curiosity but now – he had to ask.

"Is Carlos not joining us?"

"Carlos was here before you arrived. Both he and I were exceedingly early today," Withers said cryptically.

He wasn't looking at Darby, despite it only being the two of them in the dimly lit abandoned room in the Oldboys club. Instead he looked down at the glass half full of scotch which rested in his hand. Darby coughed uneasily.

"I see. It is unlike him to be early and even more so to not stay for the full conversation. Is there a reason why he left?"

"We had a heated dispute. It turns out that both he and I had some bad luck last night. Due to bad planning and certain delays, my surveillance of Regina Mills apartment basically fell through. And Carlos... well, he had a run in with the two Americans who own the diner where Emma Swan was seen emerging from. He believes that they know the woman as they got defensive when she was mentioned, but because of his rash actions... they are now forewarned that someone is searching for Miss Swan and they are likely to contact the police as he made certain threats against them."

"And you made your opinion about the imprudence of his actions known to him?"

"Yes."

"And he did not take kindly to it?"

"No. For all his good qualities... Carlos Llanza can be very spoiled and ill-tempered. When things don't go his way or when he receives criticism he becomes unreasonable. It doesn't matter right now, though. I will speak to him when he has calmed down. Right now, we have more pressing things to consider. What conclusions did you reach concerning the break in?"

Walter Darby grimaced as if he had eaten something sour. "Not good news. It seems that Miss Mills has invested in an expensive and very thorough alarm system. It can be cracked but it will take time that we don't have."

"So we need to see inside that shop while it is open and manned," Withers said and took a small sip of his scotch.

"Yes. I can obviously send someone to go in and pose as a customer and check the shelves when the shop is opened tomorrow."

Withers shook his head. "Don't send anyone. They don't know what the books look like and I grow tired of the incompetence of others. I trust your discretion and good sense, though. I suggest you go and have a look."

Darby looked uncertain. "I lack your confidence in that I am the best person for the job, but yes, I can do that. However, it is highly unlikely that she would put the books back on the shelves in the shop."

"Yes, it is. But if you are in the shop you might find a way to look in the back or spot if Miss Mills shows any signs of having the books with her. It's worth a try. We'll save the henchmen for another task – surveillance. We'll put one man on following Miss Mills and another on locating and then following Miss Swan."

"Alright. What will you do tomorrow?"

Withers sighed and drained his glass in a big, painful gulp. "I suppose I will have to find Carlos and try to placate him. But he'll keep until morning. I'll catch him at work, he is less likely to tell me to go hang myself there."

"Probably. Well, in that case I will go home and get some sleep and clear my schedule for tomorrow. Will you make the necessary calls to get two hired guns to shadow our two ladies?"

"Yes, of course. I will see to it tonight. When you go to Henry's books tomorrow you will probably see our man watching Miss Mills."

"Good. Good night and good luck with Carlos tomorrow."

"Thank you. And good luck to you on your reconnaissance mission."

The next morning Emma woke up with something heavy on one side of her chest. In her sleepy daze she was about to push whatever it was off and turn over, but then her brain kicked in and she remembered that she was sharing a bed with someone.

She opened her eyes just a bit and saw that the weight was Regina's head. The dark, soft hair was splayed over Emma's shoulder and she brushed a few strands away that were tickling her neck. She smiled to herself and decided that even though she was a bit uncomfortable, she didn't really need to turn over. She put her arm around the sleeping beauty and decided to try for a few more hours of sleep. That was of course when the iPhone informed them that it was time to wake up. Typical.

Regina murmured something inaudible and Emma reached for the phone to hand it to its owner. With uncharacteristically clumsy movements, Regina took the phone and thumbed the screen until it went silent.

"Good morning, gorgeous."

"Good morning, Emma," Regina replied and sleepily nuzzled her face into Emma's neck.

"God, I love your voice and the way you say my name."

"What? With a British accent?"

"No, I mean the way you kinda put all the weight into the second M. You know, 'Em-Ma'. It's hot."

"You're hot. And far too chatty this early in the morning. Am I getting pancakes?"

"I don't think we have time, do we? When I made you pancakes I woke before your alarm, remember?"

"Yes, you're right. That's a shame but probably best for our health and our figures. In that case it's wholegrain toast or Swiss müsli with coffee and juice. I'll pay you if you go make it."

Emma frowned at the healthy choices. "You pay me anyway."

"I'll pay you more."

"No way, I'm not leaving this warm bed without you," Emma said and kissed the soft mess of hair.

Regina cuddled up closer and brought her leg over Emma's body, accidentally brushing Emma's pubic mound.

"Mm, don't do that, babe... or we're certainly not getting up."

"We have to. One of us has to open the shop and the other has to go to the police. Or perhaps we both need to go? Maybe we could call them out to the shop? No, they'll probably want us to come down to Scotland Yard."

Emma stiffened. "Shit. I forgot all about going to the cops."

Regina looked up at her. "We are still going to report this, right? We simply can't investigate this any further. Not properly anyway, we don't have the means nor the time. And I still don't think it's safe."

"No, I guess not. I just... wanted to solve this for you."

"Dear. I didn't hire you to take enormous risks and get a scientific degree so you could analyse strange powder. You have done enough. Let the police take it from here."

Emma put her free arm under her head. "Does that mean you're firing me?"

"No, it means that the case is momentarily out of our hands and hopefully that is the way it will stay. The police will give us the answers and you are free to take on new clients. Our relationship will continue as normal, I work a stone's throw away from where you are currently staying and, well, you know where I live."

Emma felt uncertain. She didn't know if it was her pride not letting her give up on the case or if it was a part of her not wanting to stop seeing Regina every minute of the day. But one way or another – she wasn't ready to hand it all over to the police just yet.

"Look, this isn't going to sound very logical but I don't want to go to the cops right now. Could we wait until closing today and then head down to the station together? We'll bring the books and the powder and go right there after closing time. You can even close an hour earlier to make sure that all the good cops haven't gone home for dinner."

Regina gave a soft laugh. "Fine. If it means that much to you. But no more decisions or talking until I have had some coffee!"

"Sure thing, boss," Emma said with a final kiss on the top of Regina's head. She scrambled out from underneath her lover and headed for the kitchen to get the coffee on the go and find out just how wholegrain that bread was.

Walter Darby ran his hand over his bald head. He must remember to pick up a hat, this cold was getting unbearable. He hurried towards the bookshop and its warmth and gave only a quick, barely perceivable nod to the henchman standing on the other side of the street and pretending to talk on his phone. Withers had clearly been true to his word and gotten those shadows in place. Darby got further proof of that when he recognized another man walking slowly past him. That was the second hired-gun. The elusive Miss Swan must be around as well then. He hurried into the shop and shook off the cold.

The shop smelled of old books, wood and coffee. A bell rang out above his head and a beautiful woman standing by the counter looked up at him.

"Good morning. Welcome to Henry's Books. Please let me know if I can help you with anything."

He smiled uncomfortably at her and nodded. Suddenly everything felt more real than it did when you were meeting in a dark corner and making plans. Oh how he hated having to do the legwork, he didn't have the stomach for this sort of thing. It was better left for Steel or Llanza. But Steel was dead and Llanza was probably drowning his sorrows in alcohol with a pretty blonde on his lap somewhere.

He spent some time pretended to be looking at books, picking up a volume and flipping through it only to put it back. When he was sure that the woman, whom he assumed was Regina Mills, was busy doing something on the computer located next to the till, he walked around so he could see behind the counter. He could see a black handbag by her feet but no tote bag or any form of luggage large enough to fit the books. Of course not. Damn.

He walked closer to the door at the back, perhaps there was a place where he could be hidden by shelves and able to look in to the backroom. *If only this shop wasn't so damnable small it would be*

easier to blend in and take my time, he thought to himself as he brushed past a shelf and nearly snagged his coat. The door to the backroom was closed but he could swear that there was a noise coming from in there. Was it footsteps?

He pretended to read the titles of the shelf in front of him for a while and soon his patience was rewarded: the door opened. Annoyingly for Walter Darby, it opened and closed quickly as a whoosh of someone blonde in a red leather jacket rushed by him towards the till.

"Regina! You know that last reserved book that we couldn't find a recipient for?"

"Yes?"

"I was just flipping through it and found a note in the margin. It says 'Mary would like this, lend it to her without telling Regina'. I, um, think your dad was reading it and then passing it on to Mary, I don't think he was selling it."

"Why am I not surprised! So Mary would like it but I wasn't to be told, huh? Which book was it again?"

The blonde woman with the American accent turned the book so her companion could read the cover.

"Oh, right. 'Taming of the shrew.' Very funny, Daddy," Miss Mills said in a growling voice.

The blonde in front of her, most likely Miss Swan, laughed.

Regina Mills spoke again. "Well, you better keep hold of it and give it to Mary when we meet her next. She'll love that note in the margin. Good find, Detective."

Darby froze. Detective? Was that a pet name or was this woman actually a detective of some sorts? His sources had said that the Metropolitan police were no longer involved but perhaps this was a foreign

detective? From Interpol maybe? Suddenly he remembered that Robin Locksley had said that that Emma Swan was a private detective. This whole situation was getting increasingly stressful for Darby and he could feel himself getting more and more unsettled.

Get a hold of yourself, he berated himself and looked at the door. His plan had been that if the door was closed, he would wait until Miss Mills was helping another client and then he could sneak into the backroom. If against all odds she was to catch him, he could just pretend that he was looking for a toilet. He knew how to seem older and feebler than he was and play the sympathy card. But now, that plan was dashed as there was two of them and one seemed to be cooped up in that backroom. Could she be protecting the books? He needed a new plan.

Darby grabbed a thick volume from the shelf to have something to look at if he was spotted. He peered back at the two women by the till. They were flipping through their book, seemingly looking for more handwritten notes.

He walked quietly towards the door but had to stop abruptly as Regina Mills looked up at him. He smiled nervously at her and she smiled back. He stopped casually and opened the book to look like he was perusing its contents. His heart was beating too fast and it made him dizzy. This was ridiculous. He was a consultant, not a spy.

They seemed to be looking through the book again now. Suddenly, Miss Mills leaned forward and whispered something in her companion's ear. First Darby felt apprehensive, was it about him? Had they spotted him looking? But then he saw the blonde do something unexpected, she leaned in and kissed the bookseller right on the mouth. Darby's eyebrows shot right up his forehead. Well, now they knew more about what role this Emma Swan played, if that was in fact her.

"Behave. We have customers," Miss Mills said in a low, silky voice.

The bell above the door jingled and a young woman walked in wearing a coat with grey fur on it. With her was the hired man who was tailing

Miss Mills! The young woman was holding onto his arm and pulling him along.

"Rubes, hey! Who's your friend," the assumed Miss Swan said to her.

Darby saw the woman look at him and speak quietly. He couldn't make out all the words but he heard "spying on you" and "old, creepy guy" and finally the words "call the cops". He stopped breathing for a moment. She had somehow made the henchman give him up and tell her what he was doing here!

His brain gave him only one option: run. Instinctively, he dropped the heavy book and ran towards the door. Only to be stopped by an arm blocking the door. He grabbed the door handle and yanked but she held the door fast.

Emma Swan looked him straight in the eye. "Whoa, easy. What's your hurry, Sir?"

"If you think I'll fill you in on all the details that you are so clearly missing, you are gravely mistaken. You have no idea what you are mixed up in! Bothersome little bitches! If you would have just handed over the books in the first place none of this would have happened," Darby yelled in panicked anger.

He saw the beautiful blonde's facial expression turn from curiosity to grim gravity and he felt himself start to lose the last of his nerve. He had to leave. If the police caught him or if these annoying women made him talk, it could all be lost.

He desperately pulled the door handle once more and yelled, "out of my way, you little cunt!"

That was when he felt her fist hit his face. Then there was only darkness.

When he woke up he was in a small room without windows. He was on a chair and his hands were tied tightly behind him with what felt like thick string. In front of him was Regina Mills and Emma Swan.

"Looks like he's waking up."

The third woman came running into the room and panted, "I'm sorry, he got away. He just pushed me down and took off running when you two were carrying this guy in here. I'm sorry, he had too much of a head start on me so I couldn't catch him."

"Don't worry. We still have this guy. We're gonna have a little chat with him and then we'll call the cops and they'll probably find the running guy too."

Darby felt his head throb and his face ache. For such a slender woman, she certainly had hit hard enough. He had to get out of here.

"Look, I don't know what that hired thug told you about me but you shouldn't listen to him. He is almost as in the dark as you are. It's not too late for you to back out of this murky and dangerous matter and return to your own safe lives."

Emma Swan laughed. "What *he* told us? Oh you poor dumbass! Ruby didn't come in here to talk about *you*. She came in here to say that the guy she was dragging with her had been spying on the shop all morning and she wondered if he worked for that old, creepy guy who came to their diner last night."

Walter Darby could have hit himself if he wasn't tied to a chair. The newcomer had been talking about Llanza and his little performance last night. Not him. His own panic and unease had made him assume the worst and act suspiciously. Why had he run? He cursed his cowardice.

Regina Mills now spoke for the first time.

"I will add that *I did* wonder at your strange behaviour. For example, I whispered to Miss Swan here that you were perusing that book upside

down, people actually buying books rarely do that. But enough of that. You mentioned the books. What do you know about them? Are you working with the man with the accent, the one who came to the diner last night?"

Darby realised that all he could now do was be quiet. If the worst happened and the police came, he would simply have to put faith in his solicitor and the fact that there was no proof of anything. Who would believe such a fanciful story with so many holes in it anyway? He sat up as straight as he could before he replied in his most dominant voice.

"I have no idea what you are talking about. Release me, keeping me here against my will is a criminal offence, in case you didn't know."

"Tell us about the books or I might just hit you again," Emma Swan said with a scowl.

"I doubt you will. You don't seem to be the type to strike a defenceless man. And anyway, if you do, that will only compound the assault charges against you."

"Fine, have it your way, pal. I'm calling the cops," she said and walked out into the shop.

Darby smiled arrogantly at the two brunettes who remained with him in the room. "I have money and influence. The police will get nothing out of me and all that will happen here is that I will sue the Met and I will have you all arrested for assaulting and kidnapping me. You'll never know what is going on here because you lack even the smallest of intelligence required to grasp it. You are way in over your pretty little hair-sprayed heads."

"Wow, he's a real charmer. I'm gonna go tell Granny that I'm staying here to help you guys out for a while," the newcomer said to Miss Mills. "I'll be right back."

Regina Mills didn't look up at the younger woman when she replied. "Thank you, Ruby. Take your time, it's not like he is going anywhere."

When it was just the two of them, the bookseller looked him right in the eye and suddenly he felt himself go cold. She was all of a sudden smiling, but it was the sort of smile that a shark would smile at its prey if it had facial muscles.

Emma had dialled 999 and was just being patched through to the police when she heard a blood-curdling scream. She dropped the phone and ran into the small backroom. What she saw was one of the biggest surprises of her life: Regina was standing in front of the tied-up man. She was smiling an eerie smile at him.

In a low hiss she said, “one more chance to answer. What do you know about the books? What in them could be of such importance that it made you threaten and follow us?”

Emma looked down and saw that buried in the man’s thigh was what looked like a heavily ornate paperknife.

“Regina? Shit! What happened here?”

“Our new friend here is going to explain to ‘our pretty little hair-sprayed heads’ why he has been breaking into my shop and stalking us by telling us what the books, or more exactly, *the powder* is. If he does all that, we call the police and we can all explain how he got that paperknife in his thigh when he lunged towards me to attack me. If he doesn’t – he will be in a lot more pain. For a very long time.”

Emma stood absolutely still. She was shocked by Regina’s sudden violence but she had to admit to being a bit impressed with the ingenuity and pure gall of the act. She stared at the former banker-turned-bookseller who now grabbed a hold of the paperknife and twisted it inside the thigh. The bald guy screamed again.

Regina spoke through gritted teeth. “Last chance before this knife comes out and gets buried somewhere else. Let’s start with the books. We know the pages can be turned into powder, what is that powder and why do you want it?”

Answers

"Regina? Can I talk to you for a moment? Alone?"

Regina let go of the letter opener and straightened up from her bent over position. She kept her eyes fixed on the man in the chair.

"Well, I suppose you aren't going anywhere, are you? Please excuse us for a moment. Take this time to use your hideous bald head to prepare your statement."

They walked out of the small room, closed the door and stood behind a bookshelf for extra soundproofing. They spoke in agitated but low whispers.

"Jesus Christ, Regina! Why did you... how did you... did you actually just jab the first thing you saw into that guy's leg?!"

"Yes. I was tired of feeling helpless and in the dark and he... taunted me."

"Yeah... but STABBING someone? With a letter opener!"

"It was Daddy's. He would never let me play with it when I was little, he said it was far too sharp."

"Well, clearly it was if you could do that and yeah... I'm gonna suggest that you take his advice from now on and never play with that again. Otherwise I worry I'll be the one getting stabbed!"

Regina pursed her lips in distaste. "Oh calm down, dear. It was done on impulse and most certainly a one-off. I'm not some crazed lunatic who goes around stabbing people on a regular basis."

"Well what about the... you know..."

"No, dear. I'm afraid I don't."

"The insult about *his lack of hair*. It's really rude."

Regina sighed. "He has called us much worse, Emma."

"Yeah, but still, insult his lack of brains and manners, not the fact that he can't grow hair on his head. Just because you and I have enough hair between us to make a wig factory doesn't mean we can taunt people who aren't as lucky as us."

"Emma. I don't have time for this nonsense. I'm getting to the bottom of this right here and now. I have to end this."

Regina walked over to the shop's front door and turned the Open sign to Closed just as Ruby came back. Regina let her in and then closed the door behind her.

Ruby looked excitedly from one to the other. "Okay, Granny's been informed and is covering for me. Are the cops on their way?"

"No, not yet. Regina here is going all Sarah Connor on this guy to find out what he knows. She stuck a damn paperknife in his leg!"

Regina's brow furrowed. "Sarah who?"

"The one in Terminator," Ruby and Emma said as one.

Ruby turned to Regina. "You *stabbed* him?" Then she looked over at Emma with a grin. "Congrats Em, you've got a winner."

Emma stamped her foot. "Could we stop glorifying violence here and get back to the situation at hand? Regina, I'm giving you 15 minutes with this guy. Then I'm calling the cops. I'm not gonna let this escalate!"

Regina looked less murderous and more tentative out here in the shop. She straightened her shoulders and put her hair behind her ear in a self-conscious gesture.

"Yes of course. I'm afraid I have inherited my mother's temper. I'm sorry that you had to see this side of me, Emma."

"Hey, I punched him. It looks like I'm violent too."

Regina gave a mirthless chuckle. "Well, that was to stop him from getting away but yes... I suppose we have all seen too many action movies. For the record though, I have not seen Terminator so I hope that the *Sarah What's-it comment* wasn't an insult."

With that she returned to the backroom. As they followed her, Ruby let out a low whistle.

"Hot, smart and ready to straight-up stab her enemies. Yeah, I see why you haven't been sleeping in your room lately, Em."

When they were back in the small, dimly lit room, Regina kneeled in front of the tied-up man and casually put her hand on the paperknife.

"Excuse the interruption. Now, let me make this easy and start with one simple question. What is the powder?"

He looked very pale but he clearly had a little more fight in him. "No, that secret has to be ours, we have plans for that powder. I cannot just tell you. The others will kill me."

Without warning, he kicked out with his unwounded leg and caught Regina's knee, she fell backwards with a grunt of pain but her fall was stopped by Emma who stood right behind where she had been crouching.

Emma bent down and helped her up. "Ruby, get that brown ball of string again. We need to tie his feet."

The two Americans tied him up further and while they did, Regina took the chance to yank the knife out. He screamed and the blood pulsed out of the wound.

"Oh my. That doesn't look good at all. It's deep, bleeding profusely and this paperknife is Edwardian and I doubt it has ever been properly

cleaned. Think of all the decades of germs that are in that wound now. Not good at all," Regina said with the bloodied letter opener in her hand.

He glared up at her with his mouth twisted in pain. "Stop it! My name is Walter Darby and I'm a prominent financial consultant with my own firm in Westminster. I have a family and friends in high places. I am not someone you can just tie up and stab like this."

"You're also a criminal," Regina replied calmly.

"I am most certainly not!"

Regina quirked an eyebrow and scoffed. "No? Then how do you explain the burglaries and the blokes you had following us?"

"You can't prove anything!"

"Well, if I'm honest I'm not certain that anything you tell us now would hold up in a court of law either. Answers given while being tortured aren't admissible if I recall correctly. So never mind what we can prove, just tell us for our own peace of mind and then the police can gather their own evidence."

Darby spoke with strained calm. "How about we strike another deal? Give me and my organisation the books and we will leave you alone. No police. You don't report the burglaries, we don't report this kidnapping. The books are more trouble than they are worth to you anyway."

Regina placed the red-tipped knife close to his face. "That may be. But they are *my books* and this is too far gone for me and my private detective to merely walk away. And you know it. This is all over already, Mr Darby. The only question is if you are going to let me use you as a pin cushion for this paperknife for the next 14 minutes or if you are going to talk."

Emma broke in. "You said 'your organisation'. Tell us about that at least."

Darby hesitated. "I and three friends found that we had a common interest. We were all looking for certain items after having learned about their existence from Joseph DeLuca's suicide notes."

Ruby looked confused. "Who was he?"

Regina kept her gaze on Darby as she replied. "He's the one who wrote and published the books."

Darby nodded. He was looking down at the blood oozing out and staining over his beige trouser leg. He was very pale now but it was more from shock than blood loss.

"Yes. He created the books. His wife was a brilliant scientist who, after being diagnosed with a terminal illness, spent her last five years in life developing a powder with incredible capabilities. When she died, her husband stumbled upon her research and decided in his manic state that he had to keep it intact but hide it because society wasn't ready for its power."

"Tell us what the powder is and I'll inform you if I agree with that conclusion or not," Regina said with the knife now held above Darby's uninjured leg.

"I can't. I simply cannot tell you the secret of the powder. Withers and Llanza will kill me."

Emma took a step forward and placed her hand on Regina's to gently move the knife away.

"Wait a minute, Regina." She turned to the man on the chair. "Withers and Llanza? Are they the rest of this organisation? Together with the guy who was run over? Steel, was it?"

Darby looked mortified that fear had caused him to slip up and say their names. With a look of sad acceptance of his fate he continued talking.

"Yes. I knew Joseph DeLuca from our time at university and so did John Withers. Carlos Llanza and Cristopher Steel were both friends, or in Llanza's case an old admirer, of Catherine DeLuca and knew Joseph through her. Almost two years after Catherine's death, Joseph committed suicide. He left a bunch of notes for different people. There must have been 15-20 notes there. It must have taken ages to write. But in some of them he prattled on about Catherine's discovery and how he had hidden it in solid form as books because people weren't ready for it."

He stared at the knife still in Regina's hand and took a deep breath.

"The four of us met at his funeral and got talking after far too much whiskey. We discussed what was in the notes. You see, everyone else thought he had just been feverishly blabbering on but we became convinced that he was right. Catherine was brilliant and determined enough to achieve something like this if she had the fear of death motivating her and while Joseph went insane in the end, he wouldn't lie about something like that. Catherine's work meant too much to him."

"Well, he was obviously not... of sound mind, to put it politely. I read some of the books. All that stuff about ravens chasing him, waiting for him and terrorising him. I mean, even I see it in my nightmares after having just read about it," Emma said quietly.

"After Catherine died, Joseph was obsessed with ravens. He felt they symbolized Catherine's illness, it was some form of cancer I think. Or maybe it would be fairer to say that the ravens represented death. He wrote lots of ridiculous poetry about it and those of us who knew him had to sit through hours of it and his incoherent conversation, which was mainly about how the ravens were coming for him too. In his fear, he just shut himself away and wrote instead of doing his publishing work. Now we know what he was writing: *This Unkindness of Ravens*."

He chuckled silently and sighed before speaking again. "None of us know if he figured out how to press the powder into pages to use as

printing paper on his own, or if that had been an idea of Catherine's that she left behind for him. One way or another, he clearly managed it."

Ruby spoke up for the first time in quite a while. "How did you know the books would be in Regina's shop?"

"We didn't for a very, very long time. We had people searching for them in every old bookshop in the south of England. Through the years it became known that the men of Non Omnis Moriar would pay good money for leads on these books. We had so much misinformation and dead ends during those decades. One day, well it must have been last month, a bibliophile named Jenkins stumbled into your shop and saw them on the shelf. He didn't know for sure but he suspected it and reported it. Word got back to us and Christopher came down here to investigate. He confirmed that it was Joseph's style of writing but that the books were too heavy and too many to just put under his coat and walk out."

"Hence the break in," Regina filled in.

"Yes. Much good it did us though, it was smart of you to move the books in the end. And then there was the Locksley debacle of course. We were so close and still so far away. We all had lives to lead and this project just sucked us all in more and more. We were old men and busy with families, hobbies and work. But we couldn't stop. Not when we had spent so many years looking and waiting. Not when Catherine's discovery could change the world and we could capitalize on it."

"What is the powder? Does it cure cancer or something? Come on, you've told us everything else," Emma said impatiently.

"Not that. I have told you too much already. That secret... well, we might not be super villains but I do believe that my associates would kill to keep that hidden. In fact... I know they would, because we already have."

Emma held up her hands. "Okay, that is between you and the police. Speaking of the cops, will you tell them about the powder?"

"I won't tell them anything at all, dear girl. As your employer said, none of what I have told you will be admissible in court. I've told you what I have to keep her from stabbing me again but I will not admit to any of this outside this room."

Suddenly a voice was heard behind them.

"No, he certainly will not."

Stalemate

Chapter Notes

Author's note: I want to thank Peggy and Lizzie (SoS) for discussing the contents of this fic in the SwanQueen fanfiction group on Facebook and making me feel buzzed about writing it again. You made some good points, ladies. Some correct but some not so correct, but still very imaginative. Thank you! I also want to thank PiperHG who made some amazing fan art for this fic on tumblr (go check it out on her tumblr blog or on mine.) As always, you can find me on Tumblr where I am Violetscentedwriter , or Twitter where I am VioletscentedSQ or on Facebook where I'm Violet Scented.

Ruby, Regina and Emma turned around to see two older men, they were flanked by the two guys who had been lurking outside the diner and a tall man in black just behind them. The three henchmen all had weapons and they were pointed at Emma, Ruby and Regina.

"Hey, that's the guy who was at the diner," Ruby said and pointed to Llanza.

Regina glared at the man who had spoken. "I see that I forgot to lock the door. A careless mistake I will not make again. Now tell me, if the chubby charmer here is the man your friend Darby called Llanza, I suppose that makes you Withers?"

His face showed no emotion, not even annoyance at that she knew his name. "At your service. Now. Where are the books? I and the gentleman

in black here broke into your apartment 40 minutes ago, Miss Mills. They are not there."

"No, and they're not here either," Emma replied smugly. When he just stared at her she continued.

"Ask the guy you had follow me, he'll tell you that I gave Ruby here a briefcase and a Gucci handbag, they contained the books and some the powder. I asked her to leave through the window at the back of the diner and hide the books somewhere and she did."

Withers immediately turned to Ruby.

"Alright, young lady. Tell us where the books are and we won't harm you."

"Harm me, or any of the others and I swear that I'll never tell you where I stashed the books," Ruby said with a dangerous glint in her eye.

"I think you might disagree when you get shot in the shoulder," Withers said calmly.

"Yeah? Well I think you might regret shooting me considering that my grandmother said that she'd call the cops if I wasn't back soon. Now, she's an impatient women so I'm betting that she's already called them."

His eyes narrowed. "You're bluffing."

"Am I? Wanna bet on that? Ask your pal Llanza here and he'll tell you that there is really only two likely options with Granny, she's either called the cops on you or she's behind you right now and ready to throw a bunch of fruit knives at your backs."

Llanza chortled but his cruel eyes belied the laughter. "She's got a point there. The old harpy is likely to do at least one of those things. Probably both. Still, I say kill them all and then hurry out before the police can get here. I think we have time, it's worth the risk. We can find the books on our own later."

Darby tried to sit up straight on the chair and looked right at John Withers. "Please, no. No more bloodshed. That man from Dartford, the one who guessed the truth... you promised me he'd be the last one to die, John. I'm tired and in pain and I want to go home. Get me away from here without shooting anyone. Then we can regroup and decide what to do with these violent... ladies and how to retrieve the books at our leisure. Getting the books is more important than killing them."

Withers hesitated. "They know too much, Walter."

Darby shook his head. "Yes, but they can't go to the police. They have assaulted and kidnapped me, they will not risk being prosecuted."

Withers took a deep breath. Then he looked from Regina to Emma.

"It seems we are at a stalemate. I will honour Walter's wish and refrain from having you shot at this juncture."

Llanza took a step forward and groaned in protest.

Withers held up his hand to silence him. "However, if we find out that the police know about this or that you tell anyone at all... then our hired men here will break into your homes and smother you in your sleep. And not just you.... we will come for your families and friends too. In the end, there will only be one way to stop us: you will have to hand over the books and then go on with your lives as if this never happened. Then, maybe, you will be safe."

He looked back at two of the men. "You two, untie him and help him walk out of here." The men rushed over to Walter Darby and began to untie the string.

Withers moved his gaze to the tall man in black. "And you, you keep your gun trained on the blonde, the other two will want to keep her alive the most, I think. If any of the women move, shoot her in the head. When we have left the shop you can follow us."

He nodded and lifted his gun to point at Emma's forehead. She found herself standing as still as a statue. Darby was free now and was being helped out by the two henchmen. Llanza growled and left without a word. Withers on the other hand gave a polite and old fashioned bow to them.

"We will be in touch. If I were you, I would fetch the books and keep them safe for when we want them. Good day to you."

He walked out and as the door closed behind him, the man in black began to slowly back up out of the backroom and into the shop. His gun was still pointed at Emma. She could see Ruby start to make a move for the man and muttered, "don't. It's not worth the risk. Just let them go." Ruby stopped moving and stood still next to Regina.

The second the man had turned to wrench the door open and run out, Regina ran to Emma and grabbed her to hold her close.

Emma returned the embrace and buried her face in impossibly soft, thick, dark hair. "I'm okay, babe."

"I know. I was just so frightened that I would lose you."

"It's okay. I'm fine. It's all going to be alright."

Ruby picked up her phone from her coat pocket. "I better ring Granny, I wasn't joking when I said she would call the cops."

Emma loosened the hug slightly and looked up over Regina's shoulder. "No, don't. Let the cops come. We'll need to tell them anyway. All we need is time to mop up the drops of blood and throw away the bits of string on the chair."

Ruby looked confused. "You're gonna tell the cops?"

Regina, still holding on to Emma for dear life, replied. "Yes, she's right. We have to. This can't continue. We will have to take the risk and hope

the Metropolitan police lives up to their reputation and can protect both us and the books."

Emma cleared her throat. "Regina?"

"Yes?"

"Could you... um... put the paperknife down, it freaks me out."

Regina looked at the bloody knife which was still in her hand and right now resting against the side of Emma's neck.

"Oh god! I'm so sorry! Go clean that off your neck. I will wash and put back the knife. Ruby, would you mind getting some washing up liquid and wet paper towels to clean up the blood?"

Ruby frowned. "That won't hide the blood from infrared lights. You know... if you were planning to hide the stabbing from the cops."

"We are not going to hide it, just alter the facts of it," Regina said determinately. "We are going to say that he attacked me and that's why I stabbed him. He had a gun pointed at me and Emma and confessed to everything in true James Bond villain style because he thought he was going to kill us, then you came in Ruby, claiming that the police were on their way, and he and his associates left to avoid capture."

Emma and Ruby just stared at her.

"Damn, woman. You are quick to make up lies and... totally fierce," Ruby said in awe.

Emma decide that she was going to have to be the voice of reason here and thought through every possible scenario she could. When she realised that they were all awful and that the only one where they had a chance to get off without punishment, and the bad guys were still caught, was Regina's plan, she slowly nodded.

"Okay. We'll stick to your lie. Everyone has to remember their parts though. And we have to be convincing when we give our statements."

Ruby grinned. "Sweetie, I was born to act. I've got this."

Regina looked less pleased about it and had a look of grim determination in her eyes.

"Don't worry about me. Mother raised me to be an excellent liar. And well... I'm sorry to say this, but we are three attractive women. People are more likely to believe us than some disagreeable, rich, old men with fancy suits and dead eyes."

Emma shrugged. "I guess we are about to find out. Okay, time to clean up. Leave the bloodstains on the knife and the ones on the floor, hopefully they will look like they dripped down from his leg while he was standing up. Get rid of the string though and if the chair is clean, put it away. I'm gonna go wash the blood off my neck and then I'll help. If the cops haven't come by then, I suggest we call them ourselves and then have some coffee while we wait."

"Actually, if Regina takes care of the crime scene I'm just gonna pop over to the diner and bring back the books," Ruby said while buttoning her coat.

Emma's jaw dropped. "Hang on? The books are still in the diner?! They were this close to us all along?"

Ruby looked embarrassed. "Yeah, I didn't have time to go drop them off this morning because Granny needed me to help out in the kitchen. So I sorta hid them in my closet and I was gonna stash them somewhere else on my lunchbreak."

Regina took a step forward and Emma had a sudden fear that she was about to lose her temper and start shouting. But all Regina did was laugh and pat Ruby's shoulder.

"Go get the books, dear. Just make sure that no one sees you and then hurry back here. And thank you, for helping and never complaining that we brought you into something so dangerous and illegal."

Ruby beamed back at her. "I was glad to help! And honestly, I was getting kinda bored and this really changed things up. I'll be right back!"

Emma stared after her in disbelief. "Well, at least she's cheerful."

"Yes, you know how to pick your friends," Regina said sarcastically.

"Hey, considering my girlfriend just stabbed a guy I'd say it's not just my friends who are questionable."

Regina put her hand on her stomach and looked away. She hesitated before speaking and when she did, her voice was growling and tight.

"Your... 'girlfriend', as you so unpleasantly call me, is still in shock. I'm British, Emma, please don't make me actually voice my need for physical affection and comfort."

Emma felt stunned for a moment. The made-of-marble Regina Mills was being this vulnerable? She felt honoured and hopelessly head-over-heels. She moved closer and gently put her forehead against Regina's. Her arms found their way around Regina's slim waist and she pulled her closer to her.

"Everything really is going to be okay," Emma said and kissed her softly. "At least now we know more about the books, right? I don't know if the cops will believe us or not but they'll at least look into it. We have names to give them and the actually physical evidence of a fight here and of course: the books and the powder."

"Yes. And the books will be out of our hands, hopefully that will make us less of a target. Although, I'm not sure if those murderous buffoons will let us live long enough to testify. Anyway, it's a risk we have to take and so we will cross that bridge when we come to it. Now, let's go rearrange the crime scene."

Emma nodded and they went to the backroom. As Emma gathered up the pieces of string and Regina examined the chair for any bloodstains, Emma had to ask one more thing.

"By the way, why do you think that Steel guy didn't try to just *buy* the books?"

Regina sniggered quietly. "You know, that bothered me the second I heard it and it did take me a moment to piece the details together. I knew for a fact that no one has ever asked to buy them. But that is just the thing, they never asked ME. He said it was about a month ago, well about a month ago I had a mild case of the flu and spent a few days away from the shop. As Henry also was ill, he and I spent those days at Mary and David's house, watching the Narnia movies and eating Strepsils and ibuprofen. Mary was very kindly running the shop."

"Okay. Are you saying that Mary wasn't manning the till so they couldn't buy the books?"

"Certainly not! Mary is very diligent and far too fond of my father's memory not to honour his shop as if it was a living thing. That is the issue, you see. Her reverence for him meant that she came home in a grump one night, well... as much of a grump as she can achieve. She said that a rude man had tried to buy Daddy's favourite books. Mary hadn't been sure if we should sell them as they were mementos, she always was sentimental to a fault. And then when the man had shown no interest in the books actual contents and had been generally discourteous, she decided that they shouldn't be for sale. Just imagine, if she had sold them to him – none of this would have happened."

"No. But then this powerful secret, whatever it is, would have been in their hands and you never would have known about the mystery that fascinated your dad."

Regina inclined her head in pensive agreement. "I suppose so. It's strange how things pan out. I had completely forgotten about that incident until today. Telling her will be unbearable, she will be insufferable about being right not to like him."

By the time only the blood was left to prove a struggle, Ruby had come back with the books. She informed them that Granny hadn't called the police yet and so Emma did it instead. Regina made coffee and they all

stood around rehearsing their stories until the police came. The lies about the stabbing flowed easily but telling the tale of the books sounded extremely farfetched to all of them. Truth really is stranger than fiction.

Nevertheless, the police took them seriously and they were all taken down to New Scotland Yard for further questioning. Sitting in the car, Ruby was busy on her phone. Emma only hoped she wasn't updating her Facebook to say that she might be arrested.

Emma reached for Regina's hand and whispered, "hey gorgeous, I'll keep saying it until you stop frowning: it will all be okay."

Regina looked back at her and whispered, "I know. By the way, you do know that I love you. Don't you?"

Emma just smiled. "Sure, I do. Couples who get taken to the station together, stay together."

Brunch and Bedroom

Chapter Notes

Author's note: I'm sure this is obvious but I still want to clarify, the powder, as well as any medical facts connected to it, are the parts of the story that are pure fantasy. I apologize for the impossible medical mayhem that I concocted here. On another note, the end of this chapter has the start of the reward-prompt for the reader who saw my challenge on Tumblr and sent in a drawing of the scene where Regina eats ice cream off Emma's breasts, so that will be slightly nsfw (not safe for work).

It was now a little more than a week after that fateful day when Emma, Ruby and Regina went to New Scotland Yard to give their testimony, hand over the books and of course the names of the men chasing after them. It was also a Sunday morning, which explained why Rupert Gold, Belle French, Archie Hopper, Emma and Regina were all available for brunch at Regina's flat.

Emma had called them all and asked them to come over and get an update of what had happened since it all kicked off that day in the bookshop.

They had to sit in the lounge as Regina's kitchen was too small to fit them all. The three guests were on the sofa while Emma was slouching comfortably on a kitchen chair next to the sofa. An empty chair was stood next to her, waiting for their hostess. Regina was just walking in with a pot of tea.

"Right. Who wants tea and who is having coffee?"

"I can do either, I don't mind," Belle said.

"Good, then you can have coffee with me and leave all the Brits to their tea," Emma said with a conspiratorial smile.

"I'm afraid the Australians drink lots of tea too, Emma," Archie pointed out.

"Not today, today we colonials will have coffee," Belle said with a wink to Emma.

"Yes, yes. This is all very pleasant but you have to tell me what the outcome of this fascinating business is," Rupert said.

Emma blew out a breath. "Man, where do I start?"

Belle was the first to reply. "What happened after you handed the books over to the police and told them the whole story?"

"They started looking into the guys we named and they found an online trail where these guys had offered money for the books on the black market. So that gave them a reason to believe us and keep digging. They talked to Christopher Steel's widow; Marjorie Steel and it turns out that she was glad to help because she blamed Withers, Llanza and Darby for dragging her husband into this and getting him killed. She led them to a guy that Steel had hired to do the break-ins at Henry's Books and he agreed to testify for a shorter punishment."

Archie gave a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness! So does that mean that you are no longer suspects for anything?"

Emma winced. "Well, no. I did still flee the scene of the crime when Steel was run over. But as there are witnesses that can prove that I was in no way connected to his death other than being on the same street, my solicitor thinks I can get away with just a slap on the wrist. There was a... um... strange accusation from the three men that Regina's stabbing incident wasn't self-defence but it is our word against theirs and they have zero credibility right now so we're not worried."

"What about the Constable who was involved," Gold asked.

"Ah, they have made Robin Locksley come back to Britain and confess to what he did. They got the information about how to reach him from Walter Darby, apparently. Darby cracked after the police told him about the witnesses, his blood being found in the shop and the general mountain of proof against him. He's been promised a shorter sentence for testifying against the other two, just like the break-in guy. Withers, Llanza and him will be prosecuted for the blackmail of a police officer, the burglaries and for at least one murder."

Rupert Gold sat forward on the sofa. "What about the books? Do you now know the full story behind them?"

Regina poured some tea in Rupert's cup and decided to answer that one.

"Yes. They finally got Darby to admit what the powder was. It is a compound that when introduced to the human body helps renew cells in any damaged, unhealthy or abnormal tissue. They gave us some examples of the use for it. 1. Brain cells damaged by something like substance abuse or degenerative illnesses can be re-grown. 2. Any cells that have become cancer cells can eventually be restored to their original state. And that is just the start."

She paused to ask Archie to hold out his cup so she could pour for him too and then continued her explanation.

"Well, at least that is the theory that Catherine DeLuca was working on when she created it, it was quite a long time ago and medical science has evolved exponentially since then. We know so much more about how the human body and its cells work. Anyway, the police have handed the powder over to a well renowned lab and they will do further tests to see what it is capable of. If it has even half of the powers it was thought to have, they will try to develop it further."

Belle gasped. "If it works it will revolutionize health care."

"Yep," Emma agreed while she poured herself and Belle some coffee. "The Non Omnia Moria guys wanted to have the powder and develop it and then sell it at a huge cost, keeping enough to battle any age-related illnesses they might be about to get themselves, of course. But now, it will belong to the world."

Rupert Gold cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to be a know-it-all, Miss Swan, but I believe it is *Non Omnis Moriar*. 'Not all of me shall die', huh? I suppose that is a good name for men searching for a cure which can re-grow and heal sick and dying cells."

Archie shook his head with a solemn look. "Speaking of those ghastly criminals. Are you safe from them now?"

Emma shrugged. "Hopefully. We still have the cops guarding us until we have testified and the case is settled. There's a constable out in a car on the street, right now. To make things easier and to get the cops out of Eugenia Lucas' hair, I've moved in here. It's easier that way and it's safer for Regina and me to not live alone."

Belle grinned into her coffee cup. "Yes, I'm sure it's very convenient."

Rupert gave a little laugh while Archie merely looked over the selection of scones and crumpets presented on the coffee table without a clue of what was being talked about. Regina tried to hide her embarrassment by going back to talking about the case.

"It turns out that Catherine DeLuca wasn't sure that the powder was quite finished. She kept putting off trying it on herself to do more tests and one day... she simply ran out of time as she died in her sleep. That was one of the things that drove her husband mad, the grief coupled with the knowledge that she might have cured her own cancer if she only had more time."

"How utterly dreadful," Archie said with his crumpet paused in mid-air.

Regina hummed her agreement. "Yes, it's a very sad case. Poor Joseph DeLuca became paranoid and was not only certain that he was hunted

by death in the figurative shape of these ravens, but that people would use Catherine's discovery for evil. His notes, which Withers had in his office, revealed his fear that the government would use the research to create mutants and to control people."

"Oh my. It's incredible that a tale like this could come from having a set of peculiar books in your bookshop," Archie said before he took a bite of his crumpet.

"Yes. It is a strange story. But I think it will have a happy ending at least," Regina said and sipped her tea.

Belle smiled at her and nodded in Emma's direction as she said, "it looks like it already has. It got the two of you together."

Regina cleared her throat in embarrassment but couldn't contain a smile as Emma replied, "yep, I'd go through this crap a million times for a result like this."

They all finished their brunch and agreed to keep in touch and to see what would become of the powder in the future.

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When Archie, Belle and Rupert had left, both the two women were too full of scones and crumpets to want lunch. Instead they opted for a long walk. A long walk that lead to the off licence that sold the famous bubblegum ice cream, of course. They both had two scoops and ate it as they walked through the chilly streets of London, they were cold-mouthed but keeping warm by laughing and chatting while keeping Regina's quick pace of walking.

When they were home and had their outerwear off, Emma turned to Regina.

"So, now what? We already had tea with brunch so what is the next step of the new Sunday ritual? Are you gonna read to me? Will there be more

tea?"

"Actually," Regina said with a seductive smile. "I thought that the next part of the ritual could be... bedroom based."

Emma grinned as she raked her eyes over Regina's body which was covered in a tight cashmere sweater, a striped Ted Baker shirt and her Sunday classic: the tight black jeans.

"I'm in, *boss*. Just tell me when to start."

Regina bit her lower lip. "Actually, I thought you might be the... boss, today."

"Really?"

Regina let her fingers teasingly walk down Emma's stomach towards her crotch where they made little lazy circles over the seam of Emma's jeans.

"Yes, you see... I haven't been punished for being so bad and stabbing that wretched, criminal wanker of a man in the leg."

Emma laughed. "Yeah, you sound like you really regret that. Well, I'll gladly take on the job of punishing you. Hmm. I think some spanking or maybe some orgasm-denial should do the trick."

"Oh," Regina said with a frown.

Emma rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips. "Alright, gorgeous, what punishment did *you* have in mind? Spit it out."

Regina squirmed a little. She was still very bad at asking for what she wanted in bed. After a while of waiting, Emma grabbed her hand, turned around and led her towards the bedroom. As soon as Emma was facing away from her, Regina's courage grew and she could say the words out loud.

"Remember that first time we had sex?"

"How could I ever forget?"

"Remember when you took off your belt? And I thought you were going to.... hurt me with it."

Emma turned quickly and smiled wolfishly at her. Oh, she remembered. She remembered the twinkle in those chocolate brown eyes when Regina had said that she thought she was about to be hit with the belt.

"Right. Yeah. Well, I hope your perfect ass is ready to be smacked pink then."

It didn't surprise Emma that Regina was setting her own punishment and as usual topping from the bottom like nobody's business. This was the way it was with them, a constant power play and no matter who ended up on top – they both ended up as winners.

Emma went to the drawer where she kept most of her smaller stuff and picked up her leather belt and then looked back at the woman who was slowly unbuttoning her jeans by the bed. She felt a tug in her lower belly and knew that she was getting wet, she'd have to hurry up with this punishment or she'd get too aroused and just ravish Regina right away. She grabbed the belt and took her time in walking back to Regina.

How strangely things fall into place

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Regina had slowly and teasingly taken off all her clothes and put them in a neat pile, she turned to Emma with a confident smirk.

"I assumed you didn't want me to keep the underwear on. You are usually very good at telling me when you do."

"You're right. Today I want full view of my personal slice of heaven," Emma said and took in every inch of Regina's nakedness.

Regina closed her eyes and bit her lip. She loved it when Emma looked at her. She had been admired by other people, of course. But no one had ever looked at her with such amazement, hunger and wish to possess her body. That intense gaze from those green eyes made her clit achingly hard every time.

With her eyes closed she felt Emma's hand slide up her hip and into the dipping curve of her waist and then up and to the left to grab onto a breast. Emma's hand felt warm and soft and without knowing it, Regina smiled blissfully at the touch.

"You sure you want the punishment?"

"Yes, dear. I've earned it," Regina replied in her huskiest voice.

She could hear Emma swallow hard and knew that her drop in timbre had its usual effect on her lover's level of arousal. Making Emma exceedingly wet had quickly become her favourite hobby.

"Then turn around and bend over onto the bed," Emma hissed.

Regina felt her heartbeat quicken and followed the order. Bent over, she felt her anticipation build. Ever since that night when she saw Emma's belt, she had wondered how it would feel to be hit by it. Not just hit by *anyone with a belt*, of course. Most people she wouldn't trust to hit hard enough to sting, but not too hard so that it hurt so much that it overshadowed the pleasure. Emma was always *just right*, it was strange but it was a fact that Regina had come to rely on.

Emma let her free hand caress the swell of Regina's round cheeks and was rewarded by a soft moan from the woman on the bed. Emma had folded the belt in two and made sure that she held the buckle firmly in her hand so it couldn't accidentally hit Regina. She had been in a BDSM relationship back when she had lived in Montreal and knew how a beating with a belt could hurt like hell, she also knew that this wasn't what Regina needed. This was meant to be a milder punishment for a beginner, just one notch up from a spanking. She would hit fast but light, causing redness but no serious damage.

"Are you ready?"

Regina's voice sounded thick like treacle when she replied. "Yes."

"Good. I recommend grabbing onto fistfuls of the sheets and crying out when you need to. If you want it softer, harder or for me to stop – just say. Understood?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Get on with it!"

"Oh Regina, for that bit of attitude... you are going to have to count every blow out loud. Starting now!"

The first smack landed over the fullness of Regina's right cheek.

"One," Regina dutifully said through gritted teeth.

Emma hit again, this time on the other side.

"Two," Regina said and this time there was a whimper in her voice.

When the third blow hit both cheeks, Regina didn't say 'three'. She yelped and then said, "Harder, hit me like you mean it."

So Emma did. The fourth blow left a bright red mark in its wake and Regina cried out in pain and pleasure. It took four more strokes until Regina had had enough. But it wasn't because she was in too much pain, it was because she couldn't wait to be fucked any longer. She turned around and grabbed Emma's hand to bring it to her sopping wet core. Emma groaned with desire when she felt the copious amount of hot, silky liquid waiting for her there. She pushed Regina onto the bed and got on top of her.

Two fingers were buried deep inside Regina before she could even ask for them. They kissed as if they were thirsting to death for it and the fucking soon turned desperate. Regina bucked her hips to move with Emma's fingers and she in return thrustured them in as fast as she could to rub at the slick spot deep inside Regina.

It didn't take long for Regina to orgasm in whimpering pleasure. While she regained her breath, Emma kissed her ear and whispered, "Looks like you enjoyed your punishment."

"Yes, dear. Now let's see if you enjoyed it," Regina said breathlessly and rolled them over so that she could straddle Emma's thighs and unzip her jeans. Soon her hand was inside the tight jeans and feeling Emma's swollen, drenched cunt.

"Miss Swan. I'd say you more than just enjoyed that. It clearly made you aroused beyond belief, you filthy little slut."

Emma shivered a little. God, how she loved it when Regina talked dirty.

"You need to be fucked so bad that I don't even think we have time to take your clothes off. You'll just have to lie there, desperate but dressed and take it any way you can get it," Regina purred.

Emma moaned as she felt Regina's fingers start to play with her erect, sensitive clit. It would be so easy to just lay here under the naked, sexy

vixen and just come her brains out. But she wanted more.

"I want the strap-on," Emma said in a whimper.

"Oh really? And why should I give you what you want after that beating you just gave me?"

Before replying, Emma stifled another moan due to the fingers still massaging her clit mercilessly.

"Because you said you wanted me to be the boss today."

"Well, I've changed my mind. So if you want to be mounted with that big, purple rubber cock you bought us, you better ask nicely."

"Fine, you bitch. Please fuck me with the strap-on."

"That's my girl," Regina cooed and pulled her fingers out of the panties and jeans. They glistened wetly and she sucked them clean before pulling out a long, black box from under the bed.

While Emma scrambled out of her clothes, Regina picked up a couple of sex toys which had gotten tangled up in the harness for the strap-on. When she had finally gotten the harness free, she put it on and tightened it firmly. She grimaced a bit as the straps touched her sore ass cheeks but persevered until it was on. Then she placed the knobbly, purple dildo in the ring and made sure it was secure. She looked up and saw Emma laid out on her back and watching her.

"It's so fucking sexy when you put that on. You've got such discipline and precision with it. I really feel like I'm... in good hands."

Regina smirked. "I thought it was the toy you wanted and not my hands?"

"If I'm very good, maybe I can have both? My clit feels so lonely without your fingers."

"Perhaps. We'll see how well you do."

Regina crawled onto the bed and laid down on top of Emma, guiding the tip of the dildo inside her. Emma moaned Regina's name and put her arms around her lover to pull her even closer, making the strap-on slide all the way in. Regina fucked her softly and slowly and lifted her head to stare straight into sex-drunk, green eyes. Every time the strap-on went all the way in and filled Emma, Regina whispered, "I love you."

Soon Emma began to squirm, something Regina had learnt meant that she wanted more. She picked up the pace and pushed in harder. Emma's whimpers showed that she was on the right track. She stopped whispering her affection and focused her energy on keeping the rhythm. Regina hated having to pause because she got physically tired.

Emma's short nails rasped shallow lines on Regina's back and her noises showed that she was getting very close. Regina leaned forward and licked at her ear teasingly.

"Yes, lick it," Emma panted instinctively.

Regina let her tongue play in every crevice of the pale ear and even pushed the tip of her tongue in as far as she could. She didn't know if it was that which pushed Emma over the edge or if it was just good timing, but Emma came violently underneath her. She bucked and screamed so much that Regina almost felt jealous of the obviously remarkable orgasm.

When she was done Emma panted out, "thank you."

"Oh don't thank me, dear. I'm not finished," Regina said sternly.

She pushed herself up, pulling the dildo out of Emma as she did, and grabbed onto Emma's legs to push them up and lay them over her own shoulders. Then she drove the fake-cock into Emma again.

Emma gasped and then laughed. "Not even a break to catch my breath?"

"I took it out while I readjusted your legs, that is all the break you have deserved," Regina said with a naughty smile.

Emma laughed again and then pinched her own nipples, simply because she knew it turned Regina on. Regina responded by biting her lip and picking up the pace of her thrusts. After a few seconds Emma, dizzy from moaning and the pleasure taking over her body, asked, "what about those fingers you promised my clit?"

"I didn't promise anything, my love. I said 'perhaps', remember?"

"Well, I want them and I'm not coming without them. So unless my clit gets your fingers, you'll just have to thrust yourself tired, lady!"

Regina shook her head and hid a smile. "You cheeky, little minx. Fine, turn over."

She pulled out and backed away so Emma could turn over unimpeded. Emma quickly flipped over and spread her strong legs. Regina grabbed a pillow and pushed it under Emma's lower belly to make more space, and then she guided the strap-on into Emma from behind before sliding her hands in below the edge of the pillow and finding Emma's aching, waiting clit.

She rubbed it in circles while thrusting the dildo into Emma and was soon rewarded by moaned expletives and the repeated word 'yes' from the woman underneath her. They kept it up for a while and soon they were both getting a sheen of sweat on their skin from the exertion. Emma's perfect, pink pussy was so wet that Regina knew there would be a wet patch on the bed. She grinned wickedly at the thought and fucked Emma a little faster while kissing her shoulder.

Soon Emma's second orgasm hit and this time there was no sound from the climaxing blonde. All that was heard was a sharp intake of breath and then the sound of the bed moving a little as Emma trembled and twitched through her climax. When the orgasm had finished with her Emma burst out in a heartfelt, "fuck me."

Regina laughed and kissed her blonde hair before replying, "I think I just did, dear. Did you want an encore?"

"No! No, I'm done. Wow," Emma panted.

Regina smiled happily and kissed her hair again.

"When you are okay to move again, we should save some time by having a shower together."

Emma took a deep, calming breath. "Okay, sure. Why are we saving time?"

"Because we have a date."

"Really? With each other?"

"No, you plum! I'm quite sure this afternoon was our date. No, I'm introducing you to someone else tonight. Someone important. I think it's time. I'll tell you more after the shower."

Emma, ever the flexible social creature, just shrugged.

"Cool. Just let me rehydrate and then we can shower."

After a shower, which amazingly only de-railed into sex once when Emma insisted on cleaning ALL parts of Regina's body for her, they were getting dressed.

"Hey, if I'm meeting someone important I'd like to make a bit of an effort tonight. Can I borrow one of your dresses again?"

"Naturally. What's mine is yours. As long as you don't spill something un-washable on it, of course."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Yeah, of course."

In the end Emma borrowed a long-sleeved, black dress which was knee-length on Regina but a little shorter on Emma, a pair of stay-ups and those grey Louboutin's she had borrowed last time. Regina handed her a grey cardigan to finish it off. Regina dressed in her favourite

burgundy dress and a tweed suit jacket. They applied make-up and did their hair, fighting over the bathroom mirror like school girls and giggling though all of it. Well, Emma giggled while Regina mainly sighed a lot.

Finally ready to go, Regina gazed at Emma, who was scrunching up the curls she had just painstakingly created, and had to remind herself to stop staring like a lovesick teenager. She made herself look away.

Emma noticed Regina's sudden turning away and looked anxiously at her. "You okay?"

"Yes. I just... I truly meant what I said back in Gold's shop, Emma. You are extraordinarily beautiful. Sometimes... Your beauty makes my heart forget to beat."

"You sappy romantic. This is what happens when you read too many books," Emma said. But the blush creeping into her cheeks showed that the compliment had hit home.

Emma put on her jacket before she decided to finally ask, "So, do I get any clues about who I'm gonna meet?"

"Oh you'll guess it soon enough when you see the house. You've been there before."

And Emma had. When they arrived at their destination, she looked up at the house where she had drunk coffee with Mary and talked about how she could get to know Regina better. That was when the fateful idea of following her to discover her Sunday secret had been born. It was hard to imagine that it was only about three weeks ago this had all started. How the hell had two so guarded and headstrong women gotten so close in such short time? *Don't question it, Swan, just enjoy it and pray it lasts*, Emma thought to herself.

Regina stopped with her hand on the key she had just put in the Nolan's front door.

"Emma. Before we go in... I... need to ask you something."

"Sure, you can ask me anything."

"I know that you... tend to roam and that you are not very good at staying in one place, one job and one relationship. I just need to know that you are determined to stay with me. Promise me that you won't just get up and leave London."

"I promise that I won't. If you promise me that you won't start pushing me away again."

"Ah, that is a difficult task for me. But I'll do everything in my power to fight the urge, I promise."

"I can't ask for more than that. We'll both fight our nature for the good cause."

"And what is that good cause, Miss Swan?"

"Love, *Miss Mills*. Honest, grown-up love that we both went into with eyes open and hearts ready to take a risk."

Regina smiled. "Well, in that case... "

She paused to unlock and open the door. Then she indicated the three people waiting in the hallway with her hand.

"... there is some people I want you to meet; Henry, David, and of course Mary - this is Emma, my, well, girlfriend is such a ridiculous term at our age. This is my..."

She paused again and looked at Emma who stood on the top stair with a beaming smile, her hair blown about by the November wind and roses on her cheeks.

"... My Emma," she finished in a tender voice.

Henry, a boy of about twelve Emma guessed, looked her up and down and said, "Yeah, she looks normal enough. Right, can we eat now?"

To the sounds of the grown-ups laughter, Emma and Regina went in and took their coats off. After some handshaking and discussing what everyone wanted to drink, they all sat down at the scuffed old table and had their first family dinner together.

Looking at Emma and Regina bickering and casting loving glances at one another, Mary wanted to take a moment to go out and wink at the picture of Henry Senior on the wall, but even she realised that doing that would be far too sappy.

She did however point out to everyone how absolutely right she had been to refuse to sell those books to the 'rude old man'. And Regina promptly threw a piece of broccoli at her and was applauded by Henry and Emma for her perfect aim. All in all, it was a perfect Sunday dinner.

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